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# Images under Control:

# Pessimism, Humour and Stupidity in the Digital Age

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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art has been composed by myself, is entirely my own work, and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a periodization of the present according to which contemporary art and visual culture are understood to be symptomatic of an increasingly pervasive pessimistic social, political and ecological outlook. This pessimism I will claim is what is authentically new about our contemporary cultural forms, which are directed towards a particular form of humour and stupidity. Core elements in the periodization include the limitation of imaginative horizons expressed in the well-known remark of Fredric Jameson's that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, as well as the pervasive sense that nature is in a state of perpetual and endemic crisis and the idea that modern computing technology is making us stupider than we have ever been before. I argue that these issues are symptomatic of what Gilles Deleuze, in 1990, termed the societies of Control – a world of corporate power, ubiquitous computing, data extraction and financial capitalism that has intensified since its early diagnosis.

However, dominant narratives of art and visual culture continue to theorize artistic production according to traditionally avant-garde categories of resistance, criticality, transgression and subversion. This presumes art to have an agency that is difficult to imagine in the current social situation. In this respect, the thesis in part constitutes a critical reflection on the pressures placed upon our existing models of art and visual culture - for example, and centrally, the idea of an 'avant-garde' - by current social and technological conditions. Building on these observations, the thesis proposes a new model of contemporary art and visual culture that has no agency: *images under control* that are formed, as epiphenomena, by technological apparatuses of Control; studying examples such as extreme sports stunts, internet memes, online trolls, bad quality jpegs and impassive 'artworks'. The purpose is to ask what value we can place on these emergent cultural forms, which seem to mirror, reflect and reiterate a pessimistic worldview deeply entrenched in the societies of Control

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## Introduction

This thesis engages with the idea of a society of Control, following Gilles Deleuze who developed his argument in a short essay entitled 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' (1990), a few years before he committed suicide in 1995. The description he proposed is of a society supported by 'a Control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant (whether animal in a reserve or human in a corporation, as with an electronic collar)'.[1] Deleuze's proposition of a general 'Control mechanism' seems eerily to anticipate the many and varied devices of electronic surveillance that organise us today, from mobile phones to online data profiles and electronic passports. Likewise, his suggestion that social order is maintained upon the premise that we are never not under or within some sort of Control and that we always have the sense we are being watched or are giving our position away to some unseen authority, seems aptly to describe the mechanisms of social regulation with which we are now so familiar as to, most of the time, more or less forget about them. Deleuze writes of Control as corresponding to a world of computers, corporations, 'idiotic' competitiveness, finance capital, marketing, debt; a world where everything 'enter[s] into the open circuits of the bank'.[2] Indeed this is the world as we now know it.

'Images under Control' sets out to examine the visual culture of this society: the images or sets of images that can be seen to materialize, or make real, the conception of the world or particular worldview that is advanced by Control. More crucially, the thesis argues that we can use these images to think with. By this, I mean that images will be used here to extend, test, trouble or call into question what we think we might know about our societal situation and Deleuze's account of it. In this respect, images are understood as mediations between the world and human beings. They are a necessary component of our everyday experience because, as the media philosopher Vilém Flusser makes clear, '[h]uman beings 'ex-ist', i.e. the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it

[1] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' [1990], *October*, vol. 59. (Winter 1992), 7.
[2] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 6.

comprehensible'.[3] Thus we might say that it is through images that we know the world and orient ourselves within its mesh. At the same time, Flusser warns that such images 'are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create'.[4] Building on Flusser's definition, the thesis presents a series of images that delineate specific categories of experience which functionalize our behaviour in unexpected ways, and signal the manner in which our lives are administered in a Control society. In this sense, I neither idealize the efficacy of images, as if they could 'escape' Control, nor am I totally cynical about them, as if the operations of Control entirely explained their functioning, but in all cases, I argue for the primacy of the image in our day-to-day experience. It is what enables our understanding of Control's putative 'reality' because it, to follow Jean Baudrillard, has 'contaminate[d] reality and [begun] to model it'.[5] Moreover, I want to claim that the operations of images exceed our rational understanding, meaning that we can unpick them, finding buried thoughts or ideas, in a way that challenges our preconceptions. Thus this project seeks to develop a new model for the interpretation of contemporary visual culture: one that is at odds with existing accounts, which too often - at least to my mind - seek to maintain an avant-gardist logic grounded in theories of capitalist society that were conceptualised before the social, cultural and technological innovations that define our current social situation. Indeed, it is on this point that the central questions of the thesis emerge: what are the pressures placed upon our existing models of art and visual culture - for example, and centrally, the idea of an 'avant-garde' - by current social and technological conditions? How are these pressures registered and also negotiated in images? What new forms have been found by artists that bring these questions to light in an aesthetic register, one no longer premised on the staid bifurcation between, on the one hand, art as a kind of idealistic social praxis and on the other hand, merely a version of modernism as usual? I will argue that the examples of visual culture presented here, in an account which cannot be exhaustive, but aims to be insightful, may upon close analysis, be

[3] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* [1983], tr. Anthony Matthews (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 9.
[4] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of* Photography, 10.
[5] Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, tr. P. Patton and P. Foss (Sydney: Power Institute, 1987), 16.

found to respond to the challenges presented by Control society; at the same time, forcing us to develop new theories and conceptualisations in order to account for their sometimes surprising effects and operations.

For Deleuze, Control represented an epochal break from the older 'disciplinary' societies, which Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1977), located in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which reached their fullest realisation in the twentieth century. Discipline was connected to the process by which the bourgeoisie became the politically dominant class in the eighteenth century. Their establishment of a 'formally egalitarian juridical framework' was supported by 'discipline', which Foucault writes of 'as all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical…They seem to constitute the same type of law on a different scale, thereby making it more meticulous and more indulgent'.[6] Disciplinary society organized life into a series of enclosed spaces, within which the individual was implicated in specific systems of 'micro-power'. Social experience was concentrated, arranged and rigidified as a procession of what Deleuze terms *molds*. He writes that:

> The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws: first, the family; then the school ("you are no longer in your family"); then the barracks ("you are no longer at school"); then the factory; from time to time the hospital; possibly the prison, the preeminent instance of the enclosed environment.[7]

The spaces of Control, by contrast, are not organized as *molds* but as *modulations*: like a 'self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point'.[8] This is to say that the old separated spheres of life have collapsed and what was 'discipline' (i.e. specific sets of rules for specific spaces) has become 'free-floating' and gaseous so that we are always being acted upon by some sort of indeterminate 'micro-power'. Deleuze provides the contrast between the factory and the corporation as an example of this shift - the corporation being emblematic of Control's modulatory power. For instance, the corporation, which has symbolically replaced the factory in the Control

[6] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 222.
[7] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 3.
[8] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 4.

societies, imposes a 'modulation of each salary, in states of perpetual metastability', meaning that wages are no longer fixed but always have the potential to modulate up and down, pinning the worker to a state of continuous uncertainty.[9] This is certainly the case with an increasingly precarious workforce who may be self-employed, on a temporary contract or earning sales/bonus related pay. Accordingly the corporation supplements work with a spirit of competition, pitting workers against one another through challenges, contests and 'highly comic group sessions'.[10] The worker must commit to these activities wholeheartedly in order to care for their now anxiety-inducing 'metastable' salary, which is liable to fluctuate according to any number of variables. 'If the most idiotic television game shows are so successful', Deleuze intones, 'it's because they express the corporate situation with great precision'.[11] This constant sense of anxiety, competition and uncertainty is crucial to the disciplining of society after discipline because it pressures individuals to discipline themselves. The Intel CEO Andy Grove all but confirms this in his 1996 book on management theory *Only The Paranoid Survive*, in which he writes that the 'most important role of managers is to create an environment in which people are passionately dedicated to winning in the marketplace. Fear plays a major role in creating and maintaining such a passion. Fear of competition, fear of bankruptcy, fear of being wrong, and fear of losing can all be powerful motivators'.[12] Moreover, Grove lends further credibility to Deleuze's analysis in his likening of the corporation to a 'living organism'.[13] In language that evokes Deleuze's claim that Control's *spirit animal* is the snake ('discipline,' he suggests, corresponds to the 'mole'), Grove asserts a serpentine character to the corporation, which 'has to continue to shed its skin' and remain in a state of constant 'transformation'.[14] This is moreover reflected in the normalization of flexible and precarious work, which also

[9] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 4.
[10] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 4.
[11] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 4.
[12] Andy Grove, *Only The Paranoid Survive: How to Exploit the Crisis Points That Challenge Every Company and Career* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1996), quoted in Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 241.
[13] Grove quoted in Mike Sager, 'Andy Grove: What I've Learned', *Esquire* (January 2007), http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/a1449/learned-andy-grove-0500/, accessed 25/02/16.
[14] Grove quoted in Sager, 'Andy Grove: What I've Learned', http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/a1449/learned-andy-grove-0500/, accessed 25/02/16.

requires us to remain in a state of continuous transformation. In the new corporate work environment, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello write, the exemplary individual (they use the phrase the 'great man') is one who 'proves *adaptable* and *flexible,* able to switch from one situation to a very different one, and adjust to it; and *versatile,* capable of changing activity or tools, depending on the nature of the relationship entered, into with others or with objects. It is precisely this *adaptability* and *versatility* that make him [or her] employable'.[15] One of the distinctive and eye-catching features of Deleuze's theorisation of this situation, helping to make it more imaginative and revealing than a straightforward sociological analysis, is his claim that each society is 'easily matched' with a type of machine.[16] This means not that the machine determines social forms, but rather that the machine expresses the social forms capable of generating them and using them. This can be interpreted as suggesting that machines and their attendant cultural forms can be unravelled in a way that brings to light some implicit trends and tendencies that are entrenched in current society. We can confidently assert that the non-enclosed and free-floating power of Control is best symbolised by the computer - a machine that sits in the office, in the home, in the pocket and on the body and through which we can continuously monitor the world and be continuously monitored ourselves. Computer-based technologies are therefore fundamental to the images explored in this thesis, all of which are directly mediated in some way by this machine. These images, however, are not understood as fully determined by the machine: rather they function as epiphenomena, running alongside its protocols, sometimes overlapping and adjoining and sometimes unadjoining and confusing or contradicting them. In this sense, the thesis comprises what may seem outwardly a haphazard study of various images that are emergent to the social and technological order of Control. Nevertheless, this heterogeneity allows for an extensive look at and consideration of various vital features of our society's visual culture, such as for instance, different modes of image production technologies, different modes of images' circulation and distribution, and varying uses, receptions and forms of critical evaluation of images. Thus user-generated online imagery produced for social media, 'iconic' images from

[15] Luc Boltanksi and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Gregory Elliott (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 112.
[16] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 6.

popular culture, ‘elite’ artworks, and cutting-edge videos existing both within art galleries and on YouTube all have a place in my analysis.

The thesis is structured in four chapters, each of which tackles particular aspects of contemporary visual culture or contemporary art production on the principle that both ‘high’ art and popular culture function as equally revealing manifestations of wider societal trends. It follows that art and popular visual culture are treated here as equivalent categories, their only differences being understood as institutional (conditions of production, reception, sale, display etc.). In this respect, this is an anti-exceptionalist treatment of art that does not recognize any supposed unique agency of the artwork or artist: for the simple reason that, I maintain, such agency cannot exist for any individual or cultural form in our current society. Indeed, an initial motivation of the thesis was to challenge and attempt to dismantle this presumption, which continues to underwrite much contemporary critical writing on art, thereby perpetuating a false impression of our social situation.

Each chapter serves a specific strategic purpose in the thesis, revealing and exploring key aspects of Control’s problematizing of our existing models of art and visual culture. For instance, the concept of ‘nature’, the revolutionary figure of the ‘collective’ and the idea of the ‘avant-garde’ are recurring themes. This is because these subjects, inherited largely from modernism, continue to have a certain currency within artistic discourse that, to my mind, requires reconsideration in light of contemporary conditions. The first chapter looks at ‘real’ or literal pictures of the Earth: iconic images that organize our perception of the world by pulling it together as a singular visual object, and that, I argue, indicate our changing relationship to ‘nature’ in an environment thoroughly augmented by advanced technological apparatuses. Using Martin Heidegger’s 1938 essay ‘The Age of the World Picture’ as an interpretative framework, I suggest that NASA’s iconic photographs of the Earth from outer space, from 1966-1972, represent a realization of Heidegger’s concept of the ‘world picture’. The chapter then considers what might best literalize our current ‘world picture’. Overall, I propose a shift from a euphoric worldview in the ’60s and ’70s, symbolised by NASA’s *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* photographs, to a dysphoric worldview in the 2000s, symbolised by Google Earth and Red Bull’s *Stratos*

project.[17] This dysphoria is indicative, I suggest, of a new perception of our planet, mediated in part by a new relationship to nature. In the '60s and '70s the Earth was widely viewed as a fragile and beautiful object, a bounty of resources that united humanity via a shared duty of care. Now, by contrast, the planet is viewed as a threatening or potentially hostile object whose interests are at odds to our own. A current prediction states that by December 2016 'the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will be high enough to trigger a new phase of global climate change from which the chances of recovery are slim'.[18] This, we are told, is a point of no return: 'beyond our climate's tipping point'.[19] On this account, the Earth is no longer bountiful: it's a ticking time-bomb.

Indeed we have already surpassed many climate tipping points: May 2015 was the deadline for a 2007 UN tipping point and the year 2000 was the tipping point for a 1989 prediction.[20] Furthermore in 2009 the NASA scientist Dr. James Hansen informed the then-President elect Barack Obama that he had four years to save the world from global warming: another expired deadline.[21] Climate change was first recognized as a serious problem in 1979 at the UN's First World Climate Conference, which issued a statement calling for governments 'to foresee and prevent potential man-made changes in climate that might be adverse to the well-being of humanity'.[22] Needless to say, our perception of the planet has shifted dramatically from 1979 onwards, into what is now full-on and perpetual planetary dysphoria: a generally depressive, cynical and perhaps suicidal outlook that sees us

[17] In this sense, I am drawing on Emily Apter's useful definition of 'planetary dysphoria' in her analysis of cinematic and philosophical trends in the 2000s and 2010s that respond to ecological crisis. See Emily Apter, 'Planetary Dysphoria', *Third Text*, vol. 27, iss. 1 (2013), 131- 140.

[18] Roz Pidcock, 'Can we estimate the tipping point into irreversible climate change? We assess the One Hundred Months campaign', *Carbon Brief* (October 2012), http://www.carbonbrief.org/can-we-estimate-the-tiing-point-into-irreversible-climate-change-we-assess-the-one-hundred-months-campaign, accessed 26/02/16.

[19] Pidcock, 'Can we estimate the tipping point into irreversible climate change? We assess the One Hundred Months campaign', http://www.carbonbrief.org/can-we-estimate-the-tiing-point-into-irreversible-climate-change-we-assess-the-one-hundred-months-campaign, accessed 26/02/16.

[20] Marc Morano, 'Flashback 1989: UN issues 10-year 'global warming' tipping point', *Climate Depot* (May 2015), http://www.climatedepot.com/2015/05/04/flashback-1989-un-issues-10-year-global-warming-tiing-point/, accessed 26/02/16.

[21] See Robin McKie, 'President "has four years to save Earth"', *The Guardian* (January 2009), http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/jan/18/jim-hansen-obama, accessed 26/02/16.

[22] See 'Framework Convention on Climate Change', *United Nations*, http://unfccc.int/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/climate_change_information_kit/items/300.php, accessed 26/02/6.

counting down the days until inexorable catastrophe, thereby severing the euphoric sense of community that was fostered by the photographs of the whole Earth in the '60s and early '70s. The implications of the philosophical shifts explained in this first chapter return throughout the rest of the thesis, which further explore the question of our altered relationship to 'nature', under different aspects. For example, the theme re-emerges in Chapter Three, which in part interrogates the aesthetic feeling of the 'sublime' in contemporary visual culture. Traditionally the sublime was related to awe-inspiring spectacles of 'crude nature'.[23] Now, by contrast, I consider the capacity of technological spectacles, specifically as represented in digital photography (what Julian Stallabrass has usefully termed the 'data sublime'), to evoke a similar affective response in the viewer: asking how we might understand this collapse or dedifferentiation of the aesthetic sublime within a technological system.[24]

The theme of the 'collective' is also evoked in Chapter One, via a consideration of the way in which the various literal 'world pictures' under discussion produce unifying visions of the planet and of humanity in general. I argue, however, that as they emerge in the present, rather than offering the means to imagine and mobilise any politically empowering model of a 'collective', these unifying visions tend to be thoroughly dysphoric, depressing and disappointing. These changing models of the 'collective' are important objects of study for my thesis because historically hopes for the political or critical agency of art have been constituted upon a unified conceptualisation of the masses who share a common social identity. Such hopes are indebted to the Marxist ideal that the proletarian masses could be collectivised, becoming self-conscious agents of historical and revolutionary change: thus making it the task of critical practice to facilitate this 'true' enlightenment. Such positive theorisations of the collective continue to mark our understanding of contemporary art, particularly regarding socially engaged praxis. However, one of the questions asked by my thesis is what sort of 'collective' can we imagine today? And

[23] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 109.
[24] Stallabrass discusses the 'data sublime' in his essay 'What's in a Face: Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', *October,* no. 122 (Fall 2007), 82. It is also mentioned in his conversation with the contemporary artist Trevor Paglen, published as 'Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen', *October,* no. 138 (Fall 2011), 12.

furthermore, is the traditional Marxist category of the 'collective' relevant to the new masses? Perhaps instead the truth of the 'collective' today affirms Baudrillard's belief that the mass, as an object, has a 'fatalness' that will always frustrate the logic of the system that addresses it as such. This is a mass, Baudrillard writes, 'whose strength comes from its very destructuration and inertia', rather than, for instance, its collective identity.[25] Nevertheless, this is not an entirely cynical position: the mass does not at all 'constitute a passive receiving structure for media messages'.[26] For instance, it often displays what Baudrillard calls an 'excess of conformity' to cultural norms, 'giving the same coded responses, with the same exasperating, endless conformity, only to better escape', he writes, 'any definition as object'.[27] Patricia Cormack helpfully glosses Baudrillard's concept when she explains that:

> As a mass, we do not deflect back the messages projected on to us, nor do we take up the projects of History (progress, enlightenment) or the Social (rationally organised lives) handed to us, but instead enthusiastically take on the formless object position claimed for us. This passivity allows for the absorption of messages and suspension of meaning. When asked to exercise a serious and considered political will, we offer instead an endless delight in popular spectacles. When asked to express consumer preferences, we vacillate capriciously. When asked to be objects of social policy, we refuse to provide or comprehend practical information.[28]

It is the awkward aspect, or destructive potential of the passivity of the mass, as Baudrillard defined it, that I suggest points the way forward to understanding key features of our visual culture today.

Chapter Two further explores the question of the 'collective', as it examines the way in which the internet functions as an apparatus of Control that produces its own 'public' (here following and modifying Louis Althusser's influential account of 'Ideological State Apparatuses').[29] I argue that the internet, understood as what I term a 'post-State apparatus', organizes subject formation today, to the extent that our values, desires and preferences are inculcated according to its precepts,

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[25] Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities…Or, the End of the Social and Other Essays*, tr. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 43.
[26] Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities…Or, the End of the Social and Other Essays*, 42.
[27] Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities…Or, the End of the Social and Other Essays*, 33.
[28] Patricia Cormack, 'Masses', in Richard G. Smith ed., *The Baudrillard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 119.
[29] See Louis Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', *Essays on Ideology*, tr. B. Brewster and G. Lock (London; New York: Verso, 1984).

predominately in the interest of rendering us productive in a new economy based upon data accumulation. The nature of the 'public' thus constituted is identifiable, I argue, in the online culture of internet memes that circulate on social media networks and within the abusive and anonymous forums of 4chan. Both these aspects of online culture have been subject to certain positive critical claims within academia, and yet, I argue, such claims rely on the aforementioned outdated model of the 'collective'. In my reading, by contrast, the 'public' we can discern in these forms of online culture is not one that we can presume to have any agency or self-determined intention. Instead, these new online 'collectives' signal a passivity, stupidity, indifference and involuntary aggression that grate against such positive claims. Nevertheless, I ask, are there any terms in which these traits can possibly be valued?

This questioning of the 'collective' also extends into Chapters Three and Four. Both chapters focus my exploration more specifically, however, via issues related to the idea of the artistic avant-garde. It can be argued that this traditionally subversive and transgressive conception of artistic production was premised upon the idea of producing oppositional 'publics', who would be shocked by the artwork into a position where they might question the social and political status quo. Thus these chapters focus on works of contemporary art that, in part, signal an outmoding of the avant-garde in the current period. In this sense, the periodization I am offering is also art-historical in that it signals a stage after both the historic avant-garde (1910s-30s) and the neo-avant-garde (1960s-70s) have passed away, when their catalogue of critical strategies are fully integrated and functionalised within the contemporary mode of production. This means that the cultivation of dissent, transgression and oppositionality within the sphere of contemporary art fails to have any genuine critical effect because these forms have become, as Sianne Ngai writes, 'the very lubricants of the economic system which they originally came into being to oppose'.[30] In other words, they appear as conventional aspects of everyday life, based on what Ngai understands as the normalization of 'radical alienation' within the current workplace.[31]

[30] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.
[31] In this regard Ngai builds on Paolo Virno's analysis of contemporary work culture, which requires us, he argues, to be 'accustomed to mobility, to be able to keep up with the most sudden conversions, to be able to adapt to various enterprises, to be flexible in switching from one set of rules to another'.

I examine the implication of this periodization of the present as post-avant-garde in more detail through two chapters analysing examples of contemporary art: the German photographer Thomas Ruff's *Jpeg* series (2004 - 2007) in Chapter Three and American contemporary artist Jordan Wolfson's *Raspberry Poser* (2012) in Chapter Four. These case studies are chosen because each seems to recuperate some aspect of the historic avant-garde: the cultivation of the 'poor' or 'bad quality' image in the former and the prioritisation of the violent discontinuity of 'montage' in the latter. Both strategies are conventionally premised upon the idea of shocking the viewer out of their passive acquiescence to the status quo or more simply outraging a bourgeois viewing public, and, moreover, both strategies still function for many commentators as active criteria for the evaluation of contemporary artworks. In contrast, I argue that these celebrated devices of the avant-garde - the 'poor image' and 'montage' - have become operational, although not always seen, within the structures of visibility that undergird our supposedly transparent everyday regime of images: the 'poor image' in digital photography and 'montage' in the systems of screens that augment and fragment our immediate experience of the world. Therefore, these chapters deepen the periodization the thesis offers by highlighting the way in which our new historical conditions supersede or outmode existing art theoretical models and concepts, producing new art historical problems and challenges. Indeed one of the initial motivations for the thesis was a sense of personal frustration with a critical framework employed within contemporary art discourse that remains indebted to the historic avant-garde and their 'sentiments of disenchantment'.[32] My reading of Ruff and Wolfson's work, by contrast, argues that their contemporary recuperation of avant-garde strategies functions merely to draw attention to the defunctness of these devices: their inability to act upon us within the altered historical conditions of Control. This is to suggest that the avant-garde has met a depressing fate, corresponding to Baudrillard's remark that 'there is no end to anything and that everything will continue to take place in a slow, fastidious, recurring and all-

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Therefore, we are always on edge, always uncertain, cynical and distrustful. Ngai suggests, therefore, that negative affects, or 'sentiments of disenchantment', lose their critical weight because they only seem to repeat the operational requirements of contemporary capitalist production. See Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, tr. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 84-85.

[32] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4.

encompassing hysterical manner - like nails and hair continue to grow after death'.[33] Or reminding us of Adorno's comment in *Aesthetic Theory* that 'the concept of the avant-garde, reserved for many decades for whatever movement declared itself the most advanced, now has some of the comic quality of aged youth'.[34] I choose to handle the sense of deathliness that emerges in these works, specifically as it relates to the idea of the avant-garde, however in line with the tone of Adorno's remark, which is not a simple expression of despair or despondency, but instead carries a comedic register. Indeed, I suggest these works have a strange and vital aesthetic sensibility; and accordingly, a task of each chapter is to pin down, or least attempt to provide some understanding of this set of aesthetic effects.

Whilst, as I have acknowledged, the choice of cultural artifacts examined in this thesis might give the impression of heterogeneity, I am nevertheless interested in what unifies them as a group: namely, I shall argue, a shared cultural pessimism. It seems that the combination of the specific technological, economic and ecological aspects of our present society, encompassing environmental politics, ubiquitous computing, supra-national corporations, flexible working and 24/7 capital, work together in a way that produces a pessimism that significantly marks our visual culture. This is something that I want to bring to clearer recognition, because, I propose, it is an effect that is widely felt and acknowledged within critical theory, but typically, only as something to rail against and overcome. Indeed, its bearing on our cultural imaginary is disavowed or denied amongst critical theorists and artist practitioners who, whilst acknowledging this sensibility, nevertheless earnestly and energetically attempt to invent new forms of collectivity, participation and alternative economies: thus endlessly reincarnating figures of 'criticality' that I would suggest have demonstrably already been functionalised and therefore drained of genuine negative affect. The pessimistic sensibility underlying such attempts - disavowed by them, but avowed openly here - is perhaps best summed up in Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude*; which provocatively suggests that we are now living in a nightmare version of communism:

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[33] Jean Baudrillard, 'Hystericizing the Millennium', *CTHEORY* (May 1994), http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=56, accessed 26/02/16.
1994, http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=56.

[34] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970], tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London; New York: Continuum, 1997), 24-25.

> The metamorphosis of social systems in the West, during the 1980s and 1990s, can be synthesized in a more pertinent manner with the expression: communism of capital. This means that the capitalistic initiative orchestrates for its own benefit precisely those material and cultural conditions which would guarantee a calm version of realism for the potential communist. Think of the objectives which constitute the fulcrum of such a prospect: the abolition of that intolerable scandal, the persistence of wage labor; the extinction of the State as an industry of coercion and as a "monopoly of political decision-making"; the valorization of all that which renders the life of an individual unique. Yet, in the course of the last twenty years, an insidious and terrible interpretation of these same objectives has been put forth.[35]

Virno's conception of the world is characteristic of much critical theory on the left, even that which aims most fervently at the finding of new solutions. It is a pessimism that was arguably confirmed by the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial collapse, when the economic system that created the crisis was fast restored as if nothing untoward had happened: making the idea of any alternative to capitalism even more unimaginable.[36]

Nevertheless, the popular writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri can be looked at as an example of the tendency to acknowledge a fundamentally pessimistic worldview and at the same time devise positive strategies based upon critical models from a previous stage of capitalist society. Notably, they have labelled the new, seemingly impervious, post-state global power formation, 'Empire'. For Hardt and Negri, 'Empire' poses a problem for any politics of resistance that might take a critical stance against its power. In part this is because, they argue, 'Empire' has ushered in an age of 'real subsumption'. This phrase, taken up from Marx's *Capital*, describes the subsumption of all aspects of life by capital: 'not only the economic or only the cultural dimension of society', they write, 'but rather the social *bios* itself'.[37] An outcome of this is that everything is subordinated to an economic logic or

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[35] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 110.

[36] In this respect we might see the 2007-2008 crisis as equivalent to the Wall Street crash of 1987, which Baudrillard designated a 'virtual catastrophe'. Unlike the crisis of 1929, well before the system of financial capital we have today, he writes that now (in 1987) our 'only reality is an unchecked orbital whirl of capital which, when it does crash, causes no substantial disequilibrium in real economies…The reason, no doubt, is that the realm of mobile and speculative capital has achieved so great an autonomy that even its cataclysms leave no traces'. See Jean Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* [1990], tr. James Benedict (London; New York:Verso, 1993), 26 – 27.

[37] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 25.

rationality. As Hardt and Negri explain: 'There is nothing, no ''naked life,'' no external standpoint, that can be posed outside this field'.[38] The depressing truth of 'real subsumption' - that there is no outside - demands that political, social and cultural resistance has to come from within. However, despite this state of affairs Hardt and Negri argue that our new terrain nevertheless 'provides greater possibilities for creation and liberation… [and the] multitude, in its will to be-against and its desire for liberation must push through Empire to come out the other side'.[39] In their understanding, the multitude represents a new social class or proletariat that is inherent or perhaps immanent to 'Empire': a positive and unifiable 'collective' on which to pin a revolutionary teleology. Similarly, the widely debated political theory of 'accelerationism' is for some commentators premised upon a telos that pits itself against the selfsame pessimistic conception of the world. 'At the beginning of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century', Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek write in their '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics' (2013), 'global civilization faces a new breed of cataclysm. These coming apocalypses ridicule the norms and organisational structures of the politics which were forged in the birth of the nation-state, the rise of capitalism, and a Twentieth Century of unprecedented wars'.[40] Attendant on this is 'the absence of a radically new social, political, organisational, and economic vision', which for all intents and purposes, cancels the future via a 'paralysis of the political imaginary'.[41] Accelerationism gambles upon this sense of extreme cultural pessimism in order to propose a counter-politics that mobilizes latent productive and technological forces 'as a springboard to launch towards post-capitalism…a future that is more modern - an alternative modernity that neoliberalism is inherently unable to generate'.[42] The aim, Steven Shaviro glosses, is to push 'capitalism's own internal tensions (or what Marx called its "contradictions") to extremes. Therefore 'accelerationism hopes to reach a point where capitalism

[38] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 32.
[39] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 218.
[40] Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', in Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian eds, *The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 349.
[41] Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', 351.
[42] Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics, 355.

explodes and falls apart'.[43]

Both of these examples, in my view, project a revolutionary hope onto a unified 'collective' that does not exist: placing faith on the possibility of agency in a totalizing system of 'real subsumption'. Indeed the current forms of the 'collective', as we actually experience them, seem too passive, indifferent and dispersed to embrace this type of self-imagining and there seems little point in social theorists exhorting us to be different. Whilst this thesis engages with a similar set of historical issues, rather than hoping to identity any new or re-emerging avant-garde strategies, it draws attention instead to an alternative set of responses to the dysphoric worldview synonymous with Control society. These cultural manifestations of our pessimism do not disavow it, but instead welter in it. They grab our attention by pointing out and making explicit this contemporary sensibility. In doing so, moreover, they indicate an unexpected upshot of this outlook; a liveliness that is generated and seems to gather around this drudging negativity that results in a strangely energetic outpouring of the selfsame pessimism. This often has the effect of inducing us to find the terribleness of everyday life funny or stupid. Building on this, the thesis asks an additional question of Control society's art and visual culture: is our current critical vocabulary adequate to the images produced under contemporary conditions? Can it properly describe the cultural forms that engage directly with the fact of life under Control? Is there another vocabulary that might replace, or at least supplement current critical discourses concerning art and visual culture?

An example of recent discussion surrounding the adequacy of our current critical vocabulary is provided by the question of 'criticality', which forms the focus of an essay in Hal Foster's book *Bad New Days* (2015) – the very title of which (quoting from a remark by Bertolt Brecht) suggests the author's attempt to take on the cultural pessimism I have described, and defeat it, in the name of a continuation of modernist leftist cultural politics. Foster seeks to defend the continuing importance of 'criticality' in the contemporary public sphere, despite the many threats to it which he acknowledges, including for instance, the 'real-time' of communication technologies that dissuade reflective thought; the denial of an 'outside' position, or

[43] Steven Shaviro, 'Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption', *e-flux*, Journal #46 (June 2013), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/, accessed 26/02/16.

what is otherwise known as critical distance, within 'real subsumption'; the 'post-critical' position arrived at within much contemporary cultural theory.[44] What Foster means by 'criticality', he explains, is 'resistance to any operation whereby human constructs…are projected above us and granted an agency of their own, from which position and with which power they are more likely to overbear us than to enlighten us'.[45] So criticality equates to resisting and criticising, or at least exposing mystification and its oppressive functions. Certainly the culture of our times is characterised by the kinds of oppressive and mystifying operations Foster describes, and something like what Foster calls 'criticality' is important to my analysis of Control society, insofar as I seek to point out the ways in which our society disciplines and controls our forms of thought and activity. But as long as this critical perspective is described in a vocabulary consisting of increasingly dated tropes, deriving from a time when oppositions such as technology and nature, power and resistance, machine and human, consumption and production, leisure and labour, criticality and complicity (etc.) were more fixed, then these so-called 'critical' positions can only perpetuate an implausible representation of our social situation. Now, by contrast, oppositions such as technology and nature, or power and resistance, seem interweaved and twisted together as in a Möbius strip or double spiral, and I think not just our critical vocabulary, but our critical imaginations – our capacity to imagine new forms of criticism and opposition – must be renewed accordingly.

It is for this reason that the thesis turns its back on recent trends toward didactic or socially committed works of art and culture.[46] Instead it attends to an art and

[44] For instance, Foster suggests that the 'post-critical' position is present in the writing of the philosophers Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière. Both deny the viability of an 'antifetishist' criticism: Latour, he writes, claims that 'the critic assumes a position of enlightened knowledge that allows the critic to demystify the fetishistic belief of others more naïve than he is, that is, to demonstrate how the belief of these others is "a projection of their wishes onto a material entity that does nothing at all by itself." For Latour, the fatal mistake of this critic is not to turn his antifetishistic gaze on his own belief, in particular his own conviction in the powers of demystification (which Latour thus counts as a fetish in its own right), a mistake that renders the critic the most naïve one of all'. Rancière's target is an idea of 'critical art', which he suggests is premised on the false projection of a passive audience that it claims to activate. See Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), Kindle edition.

[45] Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, Kindle edition.

[46] I am thinking here of the trend from the 1990s to the present day for participatory art projects that seek to improve social cohesion or a sense of community amongst the viewing public. This can be seen, for instance, in the various projects associated with Nicolas Bourriaud's designation of a

visual culture that might be considered synonymous with what Adorno called the 'hardened and alienated' aspects of everyday life.[47] Indeed I am loosely following Adorno's belief that '[i]t is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives'.[48] He proposes instead, that art 'is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent'.[49] Whilst this metaphor of the 'hardened and alienated' seems to contrast strongly with the language associated with the form of Control, which typically invokes an atmospheric or liquid aesthetic, I want to suggest that what was 'hardened and alienated' in modernism has altered accordingly. And it is within the 'hardened and alienated' aspects of everyday life that we might, I suggest, find the vocabulary to properly address and grasp the 'ultra-rapid', 'free-floating' and 'dispersive' power of Control.[50] It is in these terms that I will consider above all the pessimism, stupidity and humour that seem to mark so much of our art and visual culture. A significant goal of the thesis is to provide a new theorisation or evaluation of these trends, which conflict with the values (such as 'criticality', 'resistance', and 'oppositionality') operative in much contemporary critical theory. Instead, I propose they represent the latest stage in a distinctive tradition that draws on the dissident surrealism and negativity of Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and more recently Jean Baudrillard and Vilém Flusser. Adorno is also important to this analysis, despite the fact that his thinking is mostly unrelated to this tradition, and in some respects, may seem at odds with it. Nevertheless, the various insights of these thinkers can be seen to converge according to a shared address to the question of the meaningfulness and value of the

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'Relational Aesthetics' in the 1990s, which 'take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space'. The artist in this view is a catalyst for a social situation in which people come together and participate in a shared activity. This is more generally reflected in the various 'turns' in artistic practice that followed, for example, the 'social turn', the 'ethical turn', the 'collaborative turn' etc. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, tr. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 113. More recently this trend can be identified, for instance, in the 2015 Turner Prize winners *Assemble*: a collective of artists, designers and architects who, a *Tate* profile announces, 'create projects in tandem with the communities who use and inhabit them. Their architectural spaces and environments promote direct action and embrace a DIY sensibility'. See 'Turner Prize 2015 Artists: Assemble', *Tate*, http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tramway/exhibition/turner-prize-2015/turner-prize-2015-artists-assemble, accessed 07/01/16.

[47] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 21.

[48] Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment' [1965], tr. Francis McDonagh, in Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 180.

[49] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 21.

[50] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 4.

aesthetic experiences available to us within varying stages of advanced capitalist society.

In line with the insights offered by this miscellaneous group, I want to argue for an understanding of contemporary forms of pessimism, stupidity and humour as resolutely non-productive, non-useful, and thus truly negative: unlike the implicitly productivist critical vocabulary of resistance, subversion, transgression and oppositionality, which continues to be employed despite the aforementioned functionalization of these once-negative values and traits within contemporary capitalism. This is to say that these pessimistic, stupid and funny cultural manifestations don't appear to produce anything, there is no resolution or synthesis, they appear anti-productive and indifferent. My question is: what value can we place on these qualities? There is something historically new and distinctive about these 'images under control' I propose, that it is the business of this thesis to work out. Whilst I cannot in the end hope to answer this or any of the other questions raised definitively, it at least asks the questions, in the process aiming to provide an original analysis of what we might call the aesthetics of Control. This attempt is pursued in the belief that these are among the most important questions to ask now, when Control is, as Seb Franklin has convincingly argued, *the* 'cultural logic' and 'episteme' that grounds late capitalism.[51]

[51] See Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2015).

# Chapter One

## The Age of the Literal World Picture

*I don't know if you were scared; I was certainly scared when I recently saw the photographs of the earth taken from the moon.*[1]

Martin Heidegger's disturbed response to NASA's photographs of the Earth taken from outer space is an unusually negative reaction to this pioneering event. These were the first photographic images of the Earth from space. They showed the whole Earth in the single frame of a photograph. The dominant reception of this dramatic advance in photographic representation was positive: as if Man's so-called escape from 'the prison of his planet' provided empirical evidence of his freedom and triumphal proof of modern science's messianic supplanting of the natural world's horizons.[2] Commenting on the distribution of these images, a 1972 issue of the Kansas City Star suggested that they had the capacity to explode a conception of life on Earth as constrained, administered and generally lacklustre: from 'that stunning perspective…looking back across the void…[Man] understood that it was a prison only if he let it be'.[3] This rapturous reception was, of course, bound up with Cold War concerns regarding the constant threat of the Earth's annihilation through thermonuclear weaponry.

The interview in which Heidegger expressed his horror regarding the Earth photographs took place in September 1966 (Heidegger insisted that it remain unpublished during his lifetime, and it eventually appeared in *Der Spiegel* on May 31, 1976, five days after his death), and the image he is most likely referring to is that taken by NASA's Lunar Orbiter 1 spacecraft: an unmanned photographing machine which now resides on the far side of the Moon, after it was retired and nudged out of orbit by a signal from Earth to crash-land. This robotic device was placed in orbit on August 10, 1966. It was designed to scan and photograph the

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[1] Martin Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel* 30 (Mai, 1976), 193-219, tr. William J. Richardson as 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html, accessed 20/07/14.

[2] *Kansas City Star* [7th December 1972] quoted in Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 94.

[3] *Kansas City Star* [7th December 1972] quoted in Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth,* 94.

moon's surface in order to help select future landing sites for NASA's Apollo missions. It also took the first ever picture of the Earth, from the distance of the moon, on August 23, 1966 (fig. 1.1). This image – the photograph it is most likely Heidegger saw - is grainy and distorted. The photograph struggles to picture the planet, which flickers up from behind the moon in a tremor of visibility. It appears as a streaked and imprecise flash, which belies the fact that everyone who ever existed did so within its smear.[4]

Lunar Orbiter 1's picturing of the Earth was the first image in a new - extraterrestrial - paradigm for photographic production. Whilst images of the Earth from space were first achieved by nonhuman robotic actors, astronauts were soon to follow and there have now been over 268,000 photos taken from orbit by NASA astronauts. Two images, however, stand out: *Earthrise* (fig. 1.2) and *Blue Marble* (fig. 1.3), the latter being 'perhaps the most widely reproduced photograph in human history'.[5] In December 1968 NASA released the *Earthrise* photograph. It was taken by the crew of its Apollo 8 mission during the first manned orbit of the moon. The photograph was not part of the scheduled manifest. According to Robert Poole's account (in *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* [2008]), NASA's focus was on the moon and its orbit. It was not explicitly intended to produce documentation of the Earth as seen from space. 'At programme level', Poole explains, 'decision making was dominated by engineers and mission planners with a decidedly limited tolerance for ''tourist photographs'''.[6] However, the vision of the earth appearing over the lunar horizon made a forceful and existential impression upon the astronauts. It absolutely compelled their attention. Frank Borman, Apollo 8's commander, remembers it as 'the only thing in space that had any color to it. Everything else was

[4] A passage in Robert Poole's book *Earthrise* details the laborious process of creating images using Lunar Orbiter 1, which perhaps accounts for its distorted representation of the Earth: 'To take a photograph, the controllers on Earth had to orientate the spacecraft correctly and then send a signal to activate the camera. Each picture was processed as it was taken. When the photography had been completed the film would be scanned and the signal transmitted, line by line, a quarter of a million miles, over a connection considerably slower than the slowest dial-up internet …The scanned images were downloaded to the Deep Space Network tracking stations at Goldstone, California, and Robeldo De Chavela, near Madrid. Even then the process was not complete. The signal had to be copied onto videotape and projected onto a kinescope where it was filmed with a movie camera. The film negative was then sent to the Eastman Kodak processing lab at Rochester, New York, cut into strips and processed into individual prints, which were in turn sent to Langley [NASA research centre] for analysis and publication'. See Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 73-76.
[5] Denis Cosgrove and William L. Fox, *Photography and Flight* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 86.
[6] Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 65.

either black or white, but not the Earth'.[7] And crewmember Bill Anders, who is credited with taking the photograph (archived by NASA as image AS8-14-2383), recalls glancing out of the window and seeing the earth coming up: 'I was immediately almost overcome by the thought that here we came all this way to the Moon, and yet the most significant thing we're seeing is our own home planet, the Earth'.[8] Thus 'the sight of Earth came with the force of a revelation' and the crew used its handheld Hasselblad camera with a telephoto lens to take one black and white photo and two in colour, as is detailed in the following transcript of their onboard recorder:

> 03 03 47 30 CDR Oh, my God! Look at that picture over there! Here's the earth coming up. Wow, is that pretty!
> 03 03 47 37 LMP Hey, don't take that, it's not scheduled.
> 03 03 47 39 CDR (Laughter) You got a color film, Jim?
> 03 03 47 46 LMP Hand me that roll of color quick, will you - -
> 03 03 J47 48 CMP Oh man, that's great![9]

The resulting shot showed the Earth, one third in darkness, suspended in a black void, appearing behind the grey lunar surface, with the 'entire human race…in the frame, bar the three behind the camera'.[10] This image, as it came to be received, was subjected to post-production editing. Apollo 8's lunar orbit was equatorial (with respect to both Earth and the Moon), and so from the photographer's point of view the Earth did not rise but emerged from the left side of the Moon. The original photograph was thus rotated 90 degrees, so that the moon's surface became the ground of the photo.[11] Moreover the original photograph was cropped, cutting off much of the dark surrounding space so that the Earth was made to appear much larger. This made it truly spectacular: a viewpoint from which we are allowed the phantasmic experience of witnessing the Earth rise, as if standing on the moon, from a position totally independent of earthly life.

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[7] Frank Borman quoted in Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 2.
[8] Bill Anders quoted in Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 2.
[9] Transcribed from the *Apollo 8 Onboard Voice Transcription, as recorded on the Spacecraft Onboard Recorder, January 1969,* made available at the NASA, Johnson Space Centre History Collection, http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/, accessed 01/05/2014.
[10] Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth,* . 22.
[11] Robin Kelsey, 'Reverse Shot: Earthrise and Blue Marble in the American Imagination', in El Hadi Jazairy ed., *Scales of the Earth: New Geographies 4* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12.

Four years later another image was captured by the Apollo 17 crew, this time of the whole Earth, in its entirety, prominently framed by pitch black space. The Apollo 17 mission was the last Apollo mission to land people on the moon, and the *Blue Marble* photograph was taken by its geologist and geophysicist, Jack Schmitt. The image is especially distinctive because there is no part of the Earth in shadow. The full disc is on view, illuminated from horizon to horizon. The contrast between this image and that taken by Lunar Orbiter 1 is stark: there the Earth appeared uncertain and temporary – its smeared form indicating more a photographic aberration than a planetary mass – and here it appears proud and permanent. This image was initially archived by NASA as AS17-148-22726 but its startling appearance and gleaming colour has, since its distribution, commonly encouraged the comparison to something like an impossibly precious gemstone or Christmas-tree bauble. Thus, it received the affectionate moniker *Blue Marble*. This image, like *Earthrise*, was also reoriented. It was manipulated in accordance with the appearance of the world map, being rotated 180 degrees so that the Antarctic glacial clump could be repositioned to the bottom of the earth.[12] These subtly edited photographs have subsequently become two of the most celebrated images of the latter part of the 20th century. Indeed they were ranked numbers one and two as part of the Smithsonian museum's 2008 celebration of NASA's fifty most memorable images.[13] Regarding *Blue Marble*, NASA's director of photography, Richard Underwood enthuses that: 'More people have seen that photo than any in the history of mankind…I was the first person to see that photograph…When I saw it I said, "Boy, that's it."'[14]

Heidegger, however, was scared when he saw that crude precursor to *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble*. Whilst NASA scientist Edgar Cortright, for instance, celebrated our newfound 'ability to contemplate ourselves from afar', Heidegger was altogether more pessimistic.[15] We might perhaps begin to understand his response by turning to his 1938 essay 'The Age of the World Picture': since these images, particularly *Blue Marble's* totally illuminated representation, might seem to precisely literalize his account of a 'world picture'. From this point of view, we can begin to understand

[12] Kelsey, 'Reverse Shot: Earthrise and Blue Marble in the American Imagination', 12.
[13] See http://www.airspacemag.com/space/top-nasa-photos-of-all-time-9777715, accessed 19/01/16.
[14] Richard Underwood quoted in Poole*, Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 93.
[15] Edgar Cortright, *Exploring Space with a Camera* (Washington DC: NASA, 1968), electronic copy available at http://history.nasa.gov/SP-168/sp168.htm, accessed 01/07/14.

these images in a different light to that of the positive humanist message that was repeated by so many commentators. By examining Heidegger's idea of a 'world picture' in more detail, we can begin to explore why his response to the photographs of the Earth from space was so fearful. We can then question what might be at stake, for Heidegger, in these literal 'world pictures'.

## world picture

'The fundamental event of the modern age', Heidegger wrote, 'is the conquest of the world as picture'.[16] This suggests the totalization of a particular world view. Whilst his essay 'The Age of the World Picture' (1938), does not specifically refer to, or even imagine, a picture-of-the-world, Heidegger's response to the photograph of the Earth produced by NASA in the *Der Spiegel* interview provokes an intriguing set of questions and provides an opportunity to explore this connection. For Heidegger the conquest of the world as a picture is 'one of the pathways upon which the modern age rages toward fulfilment of its essence'.[17] This 'essence', he explains, is 'man's domination of the earth by means of his technological will', or 'Total Mobilization'.[18] From this perspective it seems that these photographs may have shocked because their early gesture towards an enclosed representation of the Earth signified this 'raging' toward the fulfilment of the modern age's essence.

When Heidegger uses the word 'picture' (*bild*), he does not mean a literal picture or simply a representation of something, like a painting, but rather a conception of that something in its entirety: as in 'the colloquial expression, "We get the picture"'.[19] To get the picture 'throbs with being acquainted with something, with being equipped and prepared for it', Heidegger writes: 'Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world, but the world conceived and grasped as picture'.[20] NASA's photographs can be seen as both: a picture of the world and an example of the world grasped as picture. This is because their distinctive picturing of the Earth produces the impression of an object totally under

[16] Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture' [1938], in *The Question Concerning Technology, and other essays*, tr. William Lovitt (New York; London: Harper Row, 1977), 134.
[17] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 134.
[18] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 137.
[19] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 129.
[20] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 129.

our control. It comes to us as a finite and understandable thing. With *Blue Marble,* for instance, the viewpoint is suggestive of a scientist looking down at a petri dish, in which the Earth's flocky swirls and amorphous forms appear as some sort of microbiological culture observable within neutral laboratory conditions. Thus we arrive at Heidegger's distinction between a modern 'representation' and a Greek 'apprehension', and this, he explains, is crucial to our understanding of 'modern science's' process of ordering the world around us. This distinction advises that in the age of the Greeks, the world could not become picture. A translation note makes this clear: 'The noun *Vernehmer* is related to the verb *vernehmen* (to hear, to perceive, to understand). *Vernehmen* speaks of an immediate receiving, in contrast to the setting-before (*vor-stellen*) that arrests and objectifies', which for Heidegger characterizes the modern era.[21] In further support of this notion, Heidegger comments that Greek science, in vast contrast to modern science, was 'never exact…could not be exact, and did not need to be exact'.[22] It was concerned with the apprehension, rather than domination of nature. It accepted the fact that it could never fully comprehend and master the natural world.

*Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* can be considered as 'representation', rather than 'apprehension', because of their assumption of something like an Archimedean Point. This is a hypothetical vantage point from which the observer is removed from the object of study. It is applicable to NASA's photographs because their immensely complex means of production is entirely invisible: the images appear perfectly natural and uninterrupted, as if there were no underlying forces or conditions for their production. This assumption of a privileged Archimedean perspective is certainly indicative of a *vor-stellen*, or setting in place of nature. We can therefore see this essay as a partner to Heidegger's later text 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1954): both understand the essence of modern scientific technologies as an 'Enframing'. Heidegger uses this word to signify the way in which 'Beings' are 'experienced by man as in one way or another "posed"…to, by and for man (e.g. "com-posed," "contra-posed," "pro-posed," etc.) and thus conceivably subject to his

[21] Translator's note, Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 117 and 131.
[22] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 129.

control'.[23] The predominant material drive behind this technological control is the denaturing, ordering and instrumentalization of the world as standing-reserve, for the purpose of capital accumulation.

The emergence of photographs of the Earth from space can be interpreted as part of Heidegger's epistemology of modern man, which, Devin Fore explains, sees man as 'distinct and apart from the object (*Gegen-stand*) before him, and who maintains this degree of cognitive remoteness by interposing a membrane of representations between himself and the world'.[24] As an example of this distancing from the object-world, Fore cites the invention of the atomic clock in 1949, which recomposed the passage of time as something determined by rates of atomic decay, rather than the alternation of day and night. At stake for Heidegger is the uprooting of man from Earth and from a form of perception grounded in the regular movements and dimensions of the planet. The photographs of the Earth from space are symbolic of this severance of the subject from the object and more widely, from the world. Its representation in these 'world pictures' becomes a visual short-hand for 'the world', replacing a more experiential or phenomenological 'apprehension'. From thereon in, the world is fixed as something always and already known: pre-seen and pre-cognized. Whilst Heidegger didn't, and perhaps couldn't, envisage such an image in 1938 when he wrote the essay, the NASA pictures seem strangely to illustrate and demonstrate key points from his argument, almost as if prepared to his direction. An uncanny effect: no wonder he felt 'afraid' when he saw that smeared image of the planet captured and transmitted back to Earth by Lunar Orbiter 1 in 1966. It follows that *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble*, which followed just four years later, can be understood as further securing (or marking our accession to) Heidegger's 'Total Mobilization'. Thus, whilst the dominant early reception of these photographs put forward a vision of the Earth as something new and uncharted and that promised a new sense of planetary collectivity, when read in conjunction with Heidegger's essay, these 'world pictures' evoke an overwhelming, even claustrophobic, sense of confinement: the world seems small, pictured as if we can reach out and grasp it, as

[23] Taken from a footnote in Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html, accessed 20/07/14.
[24] Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 65.

something to be used.

Fredric Jameson has famously written of this sort of abolition of distance as a more general condition of postmodern spatiality, which witnesses the colonization of previously uncharted spaces by capital. This is, for Jameson, a crucial feature of postmodern cultural politics. It can be seen, he argues, in the collapse of 'some of our most cherished and time-honored radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics…However distinct those conceptions may have been - which range from slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity - they all shared a single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition…"critical distance"'.[25] This refers to the possibility of 'positioning…the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital', which Jameson argues, is now an impossibility.[26] NASA's space photographs can be seen as the historical marker for this new period in history, in which Heidegger's totalizing system of representation is intensified, or perhaps completed. This is particularly applicable to *Blue Marble,* which was taken in 1972; the very year in which Jameson claimed the '60s properly ended (he cites numerous events from the early '70s that seemingly put an end to the culture of the '60s, for instance, the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and various crises amongst the unified mass protest movements that emerged a decade earlier) and a genuinely 'historical (and socio-economic) reality emerged as a third great original expansion of capitalism around the globe':

> late capitalism in general (and the 60s in particular) constitute a process in which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism – the last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world – are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment in which the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the third world and the unconscious.[27]

With a nod to NASA's literal 'world pictures' we can, I suggest, add the 'cosmos' to Jameson's set of eliminated or colonized domains of Nature. Indeed we might

[25] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* I/146 (July - August 1984), http://newleftreview.org/I/146/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism, accessed 19/01/16.
[26] Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', http://newleftreview.org/I/146/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism, accessed 19/01/16.
[27] Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', in *Social Text*, No. 9/10 (Spring – Summer 1984), 207.

conclude that these planetary photographs effect a recalibration of the cultural imaginary according to a total system of representation, in which nothing is beyond Heidegger's concept of *vorstellen.* The result can be understood as a realisation of what Jameson describes as the 'colonization' of 'noncommodified or traditional space' by capital and the attendant elimination of 'Nature' as a separate category of experience. This is because these perfect and fully-enclosed images seem to spectacularly materialize the idea that there is no outside.

In the aforementioned interview with *Der Spiegel,* Heidegger claims that 'we have not yet found a way to respond to the essence of technicity'.[28] He goes on to explain that he sees the 'situation of man in the world of planetary technicity not as an inextricable and inescapable destiny', and that it is the task of 'thought' to, within its own limits, help man to 'achieve a satisfactory relationship to the essence of technicity'.[29] Thought, or 'thinking', for Heidegger refers to a form of engagement that 'stands in dialogue with the epochal moment of the world'.[30] In the USA (circa 1966), for instance, Heidegger claimed that 'pragmatic-positivistic' thinking in regard to technology blocked genuine reflection, and the possibility of a 'free relationship to the technical world'.[31] As we shall see, it was also blocked by the 'world pictures' that materialized his concerns regarding the modern world. And yet, in the public consciousness, these photographs did not produce a fear that corresponded to Heidegger's nor did they engender an awareness of the claustrophobic enclosure later described by Jameson. Instead euphoria dominated the public reception of NASA's photographs in the '60s and '70s, which seemed to symbolise a new ecological or environmental consciousness, promising to unite humanity via a shared duty of care towards our planet.

## consuming whole earth

'Everywhere', Robert Poole writes of the period immediately after the release of *Earthrise*, 'newspaper editors wrote about the brotherhood of man and the spiritual

[28] Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html.
[29] Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html.
[30] Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html.
[31] Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html.

unity of mankind'.[32] These missions were not just a triumph for NASA and modern science, but had been 'a triumph of all mankind'.[33] In *The New York Times*, the American poet Archibald MacLeish pronounced that to 'see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence in which it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together'.[34] Certainly the photographs seemed to confirm Buckminster Fuller's famous allusion to the Earth as 'our spaceship'.[35] Indeed Apollo 8's capture of *Earthrise* apparently transcended political ideology: a semi-official Soviet congratulation mentioned in Poole's book declares that the voyage of Apollo 8 'goes beyond the limits of a national achievement and marks a stage in the development of the universal culture of Earthmen'.[36]

The front cover of the first issue (Fall 1968) of Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* displayed a photograph of the Earth in its entirety that seems to preempt *Blue Marble's* configuration (fig. 1.4). The image was taken by NASA's ATS-3 - a geostationary weather and communications satellite - in 1967, making it the 'first spacecraft to transmit operational multicolor earth-cloud photographs'.[37] This image of an enclosed Earth, repeated in *Blue Marble* (which was, unlike the 1967 image, taken by human hand) came to symbolize a holistic worldview that found a popular voice in Brand's publication. The *Whole Earth Catalog* (published between 1968 and 1972) functioned as a directory of objects, tools and ideas for a communal and ecologically attentive lifestyle (for instance, advice on water purifiers, building teepees and geodesic domes, and obtaining fringed deer-skin jackets alongside extracts from recent theoretical research in cybernetics and systems theory). With a first edition of only a thousand copies, the *Whole Earth Catalog* became a publishing phenomenon: after several subsequent editions and supplements, Poole explains, '*The Last Whole Earth Catalog* was published internationally by Penguin in 1971

[32] Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth,* 7.
[33] Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth,* 6.
[34] MacLeish (1968) quoted in Kelsey, 'Reverse Shot: Earthrise and Blue Marble in the American Imagination', 13.
[35] See Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* [1969] (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008).
[36] Quoted in Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 6.
[37] See 'National Space Science Data Centre, Multicolor Spin-Scan Cloudcover Camera', *NASA*, http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/nmc/experimentDisplay.do?id=1967-111A-01, accessed 05/06/14.

and sold nearly a million copies'.[38]

'We are gods now', Brand wrote in the first line of the first issue, 'and we might as well get good at it'.[39] Brand's statement might seem in direct correspondence with Heidegger's fearful remark that, in our condition of 'Total Mobilization,' '[o]nly a god can save us'.[40] Brand's bombastic rhetoric is, however, taken directly from the anthropologist Edmund Leach's book *A Runaway World?* (1968). In this book Leach asserts that: 'Men have become like gods'.[41] He then goes on to ask, 'Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our environment and over our destiny, yet instead of rejoicing we feel deeply afraid'.[42] It follows that Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* sought to mobilize modern science in a manner that connected people with each other and with their planet, which was now popularly understood, following Fuller, as a communal type of spaceship. In this view, we can all become gods, united in protection of our shared planet, if technology is properly distributed and made available to everybody. Indeed the period between 1967 and 1970, Fred Turner writes in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (2006) was marked by 'tens of thousands of young people set[ting] out to establish communes, many in the mountains and woods'.[43] 'If mainstream America had become a culture of conflict', Turner continues, 'with riots at home and war abroad, the commune would be one of harmony. If the American state deployed massive weapons systems in order to destroy faraway peoples, the New Communalists would deploy small-scale technologies – ranging from axes and hoes to amplifiers, strobe lights, slide projectors, and LSD – to bring people together and allow them to experience their common humanity'.[44] They were the gods now.

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[38] Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 148.
[39] Stewart Brand, *Whole Earth Catalog Fall 1968*, http://www.wholeearth.com/issue-electronic-edition.php?iss=1010, accessed 07/08/14.
[40] Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us', http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html.
[41] Brand admits to taking this phrase from Leach, who is quoted extensively in his essay 'We Are As Gods', *Whole Earth Catalog Access to Tools and Ideas*, http://www.wholeearth.com/issue/1010/article/195/we.are.as.gods, accessed 07/08/14.
[42] Leach quoted in Brand, 'We Are As Gods', *Whole Earth Catalog Access to Tools and Ideas*, http://www.wholeearth.com/issue/1010/article/195/we.are.as.gods, accessed 07/08/14.
[43] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 4.
[44] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, 4.

Modern technology, the seeming antithesis to this back-to-the-land attitude, was privileged for its capacity to encourage an imagining of reality as a single and interlinked information system; a networked experience of togetherness which would 'allow them to become both self-sufficient and whole once again'.[45] Thus in the *Whole Earth Catalog* Brand published material from technological researchers next to 'firsthand reports from rural hippies', offering 'commune-based subscribers a chance to see their own ambitions as commensurate with the technological achievements of mainstream America'.[46] This understanding of the world seemed perfectly exemplified by NASA's photographs, in which the entire eco-system was represented in a holistic image enabled by modern technology.

In point of fact, the production of the iconic 'whole Earth' image - *Blue Marble* - is popularly related to Brand's publication and the early Californian counterculture from which it sprang. Brand even claims to have come up with the idea of an image of the whole earth as seen from space in 1966, whilst gazing at the San Franciscan skyline, high on LSD. Neil Maher writes:

> If we had a color picture of the whole Earth, he argued at the time, "no one would ever perceive things in the same way." To spread his idea, Brand printed up several hundred badges with the simple question: "Why Haven't We Seen a Photograph of the Whole Earth Yet?," and hawked them for a quarter apiece to college students at Berkeley, Stanford, Harvard, and MIT. He also mailed them to members of Congress, United States and Russian scientists, and to Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. Soon, Brand's buttons were visible on shirt collars and lapels around Washington, D.C., and at NASA. Six years later Apollo 17 snapped Whole Earth [the photograph known as *Blue Marble*].[47]

The extent to which, or if at all, Brand's button campaign spurred NASA's Lunar Orbiter spacecraft crew to turn their camera back towards Earth is debatable. However, beyond debate is the fact that this image came to represent a new global perspective or consciousness, just as Brand had anticipated. This 'world picture' with its lack of visible political boundaries upset 'conventional Western cartographic conventions', and seemed precisely to symbolize the collectivizing sense of global

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[45] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, 4.
[46] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, 5.
[47] Neil Maher, 'Neil Maher on Shooting the Moon', *Environmental History*, vol. 9, iss. 3 (July 2004), 529.

harmony that infused Californian counterculture and Brand's magazine.[48] 'The circle of the whole Earth displaces the line of the horizon', Anselm Franke has written, and 'appears to transcend all frames, borders, and preconfigured notions of order, dissolving them in an oceanic vertigo'.[49] Unlike *Earthrise*, which triumphantly displayed the moon surface as American conquest, *Blue Marble* shows a planet without boundaries as a single interlinked system. This Earth is, to paraphrase Brand, 'whole and alive and in hazard'.[50]

The symbol of the whole Earth affirmed the emerging counterculture of late 1960s California, which eventually came to be known as the 'Californian Ideology'. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron discuss this in an influential 1995 essay, which suggests that this culture paved the way for the tech-industries of Silicon Valley. 'Promoted in magazines, books, TV programmes, websites, newsgroups and Net conferences, the Californian Ideology promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies. This amalgamation of opposites', Barbrook and Cameron write, was 'achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies'.[51] They conclude the essay with the statement that in 1996 'with no obvious rivals, the triumph of the Californian Ideology appears to be complete'.[52] In this respect their essay broadly refers to the co-optation and normalization of the countercultural 'Whole Earth' rhetoric of the '60s by capitalism, which can now be recognized in the work culture of Silicon Valley companies such as Apple, Google and Facebook. Diedrich Diedrichson and Franke speak to this effect in a more recent essay that relates the 'Whole Earth' movement to the development of 'standards of neoliberal-era environmental movement, computer culture and post-Fordist corporate

[48] Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 261.
[49] Anselm Franke, 'Earthrise and the Disappearance of the Outside', in Diedrich Diedrichson and Anselm Franke eds., *The Whole Earth California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2013), 13 -14.
[50] Stuart Brand [1970] reprinted in *Mother Earth News*, http://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-and-environment/ecology-zmaz70ndzgoe.aspx, accessed 20/01/16.
[51] Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology', *Science as Culture*, vol. 6, iss. 1 (January 1996), 44 – 45.
[52] Barbrook and Cameron, 'The California Ideology', 45.

management'.[53] Therefore, building on these observations, we can suggest a link to what is now commonly called (following Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello) the 'New Spirit of Capitalism': a post 1970s shift in corporate work cultures from hierarchical structures into more flexible, anti-authoritarian and reactive network-based organizations.[54] Indeed the rhetoric employed to describe the anti-bureaucratic work culture of the 'Whole Earth' communes of the '60s and '70s can equally be applied to the twenty-first century Silicon Valley company offices, which playfully collapse all boundaries between work and leisure and public and private life to the extent that '[y]ou literally never have to leave'.[55] In point of fact, the *Whole Earth Catalog* has been directly implicated within this genealogy by the iconic Silicon Valley CEO, Steve Jobs. The co-founder of Apple computers likened the catalog to a primitive version of the Google search engine - 'overflowing with neat tools and great notions' - in his 2005 Stanford University Commencement Address, which he closed with the phrase 'Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish'.[56] This phrase was borrowed from the back cover of the Catalog's final issue ('it was their farewell message as they signed off').[57] Needless to say, Brand's 'Whole Earth' ideology is now synonymous with the corporate management-speak of the new economy.

This development was to a certain extent anticipated by Jean Baudrillard, who

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[53] Diedrich Diedrichson and Anselm Franke, 'The Whole Earth', in Diedrich Diedrichson and Anselm Franke eds., *The Whole Earth California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 8.

[54] See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism,* tr. Gregory Elliot (London; New York: Verso, 2007).

[55] In an article titled 'YouTube Has The Ultimate Silicon Valley Office', Matt Rosoff lists various features of YouTube's office that illustrate this fun-filled environment: 'café with free food, basketball court with graffiti mural, walking trail, free to use gym, swimming pool, rotating art displays, conference room named after internet memes (one conference room is called *lolcats*), tiki cocktail bar, putting green, and two story 'super-fast' slide. Rosoff concludes that: 'You literally never have to leave'. See Matt Rosoff, titled 'YouTube Has The Ultimate Silicon Valley Office, Complete With Swimming Pool And Two-Story Slide', *Business Insider* (April 26th 2012), http://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-has-the-ultimate-silicon-valley-office-complete-with-swimming-pool-2012-4?op=1, accessed 04/06/14.

[56] In his 2005 Stanford University Commencement Address, Steve Jobs described the *Whole Earth Catalog* in the following terms: 'This was in the late 1960's, before personal computers and desktop publishing, so it was all made with typewriters, scissors, and polaroid cameras. It was sort of like Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along: it was idealistic, and overflowing with neat tools and great notions'. See *Stanford Report*, June 14, 2005, http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html, accessed 03/06/14 and 'Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford Commencement Address', *YouTube* (March 2008), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc, accessed 03/06/14.

[57] Jobs, 'Stanford Commencement Address', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc, accessed 03/06/14.

suggested in 1970 - channeling Karl Marx - that the new environmentalist discourses merely functioned as another 'opium of the people'.[58] It was, for Baudrillard, a mystification created by a capitalist system, which allowed the same system 'to perpetuate itself under the pretext of *nature*'.[59] It did not fundamentally alter our relationship to the planet, which was still essentially capitalist; it only gave us another lifestyle option. Certainly, Baudrillard's provocative analysis would seem borne out by the intensified pace and strength of capitalist exploitation of natural resources since the 1970s, accompanied by ever higher levels of public environmental feeling and 'concern'. In this respect, NASA's literal 'world pictures' might be understood to deepen Heidegger's account of the Earth's 'enframing' or 'Total Mobilization': ordered, organized and instrumentalised for the purpose of profit accumulation. This is because it naturalizes our position as a God, looking at the world from a distance, and plunging the individual into a realm of illusion within which grand expectations are projected onto activities such as, for instance, recycling, and the capitalist system is enabled to perpetuate itself as normal. This can be understood more precisely as the perspective of the modern consumer, who is offered objects he or she can reach out, grasp and consume. Here the world appears as just one such object among many. Adorno wrote that '[o]nce radically parted from the object, the subject reduces it to its own measure; the subject swallows the object, forgetting how much it is an object itself'.[60] The 'Whole Earth' in these 'world pictures' is an object grasped by modern science, swallowed up whole and reduced to the technological will of a 'Total Mobilization'. Thus we can argue that a new consumerist and instrumentalist outlook on the world is born at the moment, and from the same images, that spawned its supposed opposite: ecological/environmental awareness and concern.

*Blue Marble's* image of the world appears to capture and contain the Earth's

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[58] This was claimed by Baudrillard, writing as *The French Group,* in a letter delivered to the International Design Conference in Aspen in 1970, where professionals were gathered in order to respond to the theme 'Environment by Design' (the French delegation refused to take part, and the letter acted as surrogate). See Jean Baudrillard 'The Environmental Witch-Hunt. Statement by The French Group. 1970', in Reyner Banham ed., *The Aspen Papers: Twenty Years of Design Theory from the International Design Conference in Aspen*, (New York: Praeger, 1974), 209.

[59] Baudrillard, 'The Environmental Witch-Hunt. Statement by the French Group. 1970', 210.

[60] Theodor Adorno, 'On Subject and Object' in. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt eds, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1985), 498.

entirety like a carefully framed commodity object. Space, in this photo, acts as a framing device, focusing and isolating the object from its context. The implicit positioning of the viewer as someone who can reach out to the object and grasp it is commonly employed in advertising photography. In this sense, NASA's photographs fit into a tradition of supposedly objective photography or 'realism', which is employed to conceal a consumerist ideology. Indeed, these photographs can be likened to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) photography of 1920s Weimar-era Germany. Whilst it might seem a surprising and historically remote comparison, New Objectivity provided a language of photographic form and an aesthetics of consumerism that is still in use today. This is a visual language that works to enhance the tactile and sensual appeal of the objects on display, whilst at the same time making them appear clean, new and unused. It claimed an objective and realist vision by pursuing a look of exactitude and sharpness. In this respect, I want to suggest, its ideological formation may be compared instructively to that of *Blue Marble* and the other NASA photographs, which signalled a claim to objectivity, whilst at the same time smuggling within them a consumerist ideology.

The New Objectivity photographic paradigm is characterised by strong upwards, downwards and diagonal angles and the use of a sharp focus and black and white contrasts. It is typically seen as a development of Soviet photographer Alexander Rodchenko's 'radical formalist photography'.[61] Indeed Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued that the aesthetic programme announced by Rodchenko and others in the Soviet Union, where it was put to revolutionary purposes, was turned into a technique of commercial exploitation in the German New Objectivity trend.[62] This style, Herbert Molderings writes, appropriated the 'views from lifts, radio towers, cranes and aeroplanes', which were typical features of Rodchenko's 'revolutionary

[61] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Armed Vision Disarmed', *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 53.

[62] Rodchenko's photographic technique was radical, Solomon-Godeau explains, because it 'disclaimed all aesthetic intent and instead defined itself as instrumental in nurturing a new, revolutionary consciousness'. Rodchenko viewed this new photographic style as an ideal instrument for social progress, and moreover, as something which entirely disavowed the normal bourgeois categories of art. However, as the title of Solomon Godeau's essay attests - 'The Armed Vision Disarmed' – this revolutionary vision was rapidly disarmed, and assimilated aesthetically in Western Europe and the USA. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Armed Vision Disarmed', *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 53.

vision', and presented them in such a way that 'endowed the world with the curious beauty of a diagram'.[63] Albert Renger-Patzsch's 1928 book *Die Welt ist Schön* ('The World is Beautiful'), for instance, is emblematic of this type of German New Objectivity. The book contains one hundred photographs of industrial objects, natural objects and commodity objects, pictured in a way that makes them seem cut-out and isolated from their environment.[64] Amongst other things, the series features individual images of huge blast furnace chimneys, cacti and glass tumblers. For Molderings (who also cites, in support of his critique of the technique, commentators who were contemporaries of New Objectivity such as Walter Benjamin) this photographic methodology was most successful from the viewpoint of advertising. It served to express a certain fetishism, which, in his words, enabled the 'ornamentalisation of the objective world' as a series of abstract aesthetic structures.[65] Therefore, Renger-Patzsch helped to innovate a consumerist aesthetic: a strange and homogenizing photographic language that allowed blast furnaces, cacti and glassware to be appreciated according to precisely the same visual precepts. The object in the photograph takes on a fetish character, making the ordinary appear desirable, and the banal seem rarefied.

We might say, following Walter Benjamin's 'A Short History of Photography', that this mode of photographic representation is 'creative' in a pejorative sense.[66] 'Creative' photography is problematic for Benjamin because it abstracts the object in a manner which fails to 'grasp a single one of the human connexions in which it

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[63] Herbert Molderings, 'Urbanism and Technological Utopianism: Thoughts on the Photography of the Neue Sachlichkeit and the Bauhaus', in David Mellor ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 90.

[64] The saccharine phrase 'The World is Beautiful' was given to this series of photographs by the book's publisher, Kurt Wolff. Renger-Patzsch's original name for the work was more neutral in tone: *Die Dinge* (simply 'Things'). Renger-Patzsch described his book as 'an alphabet intended to demonstrate how pictorial problems can be solved by purely photographic means'. However his publisher Wolff's assumption of the sentimental moniker for the series of photographs is indicative of how the formal style was readily usurped for commercial purposes. See Ute Eskildsen, 'Photography and the Neue Sachlichkeit Movement', in David Mellor ed., *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-1933* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 105.

[65] Molderings, 'Urbanism and Technological Utopianism: Thoughts on the Photography of the Neue Sachlichkeit and the Bauhaus', 91.

[66] Benjamin writes that with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* style the 'lens now looks for interesting juxtapositions; photography turns into a sort of arty journalism' and that 'where photography takes itself out of context… [and] frees itself from physiognomic, political and scientific interest, then it becomes *creative*'. See Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' [1931], in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2,* 1931-1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 526

exists', and instead only brings us an object which looks profoundly significant, but whose *profound significance* is unplaceable.[67] Thus, if we look at Renger-Patzch's *Kaffee Hag* (fig. 1.5), we see an attractive triumvirate of form: gleaming black beans spilling generously from their 'Kaffee Hag' packet and an intense, rich black coffee served in a delicate, clean white cup and saucer. Their tactile qualities are emphasized whilst at the same time the arrangement looks new, unused, carefully balanced and thoughtfully arranged. This ordinary still life is made to seem important. But there is nothing to be interpreted beyond its superficial display. Certainly, this was the opinion of Carl Linfert, who commented in the 1930s:

> How seldom photographs tell us anything about the objects they show! But what is transmitted as a message to the eye stares at us like a fetish – especially since Renger-Patzsch, photographs have become frightening…The urge to look, to record all that one sees, is so feverish that, while we grasp at everything, we end up holding nothing…The thing itself, however concisely and exactly the camera ends up perceives it, has less to say to us than ever before.[68]

NASA's images of the Earth from space, I want to contend, perform a similar effect upon their object of study. I have already mentioned that both *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* were subject to post-production editing procedures, which served to manipulate and abstract their extra-terrestrial perspective into something as if grounded in terrestrial perception. This was a process that turned the awesome into just another spectacular, but implicitly graspable, commodity object.

Benjamin wrote that New Objectivity had the ability to 'endow any soup can with cosmic significance'.[69] In this respect, the gleaming spherical representation of the coffee cup in Renger-Patzsch's 'Kaffee Hag' can be seen as analogous to the opalescent globe in *Blue Marble*: both invite the viewer to identify themselves as a consumer, and to identify the object as something that can be picked up and enjoyed. There were thousands of photographs taken of the Earth from space but *Blue Marble* is the one that survived in popular cultural consciousness. This is simply, I suggest,

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[67] Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', 526

[68] This is an extract of a 1931 article written by the art historian Carl Linfert in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Linfert was one of few commentators in this period of history who was explicitly critical of the 'new realist' style of photography, which had overwhelmingly received a positive – or, in the words of Molderings, 'euphoric' – reception. See Linfert quoted in Molderings, 'Urbanism and Technological Utopianism: Thoughts on the Photography of the Neue Sachlichkeit and the Bauhaus', 94.

[69] Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', 526

because it is the most aesthetically pleasing. It looks the most like a consumer object. For instance, its prominent layer of clouds wraps and obscures geographic details, just as protective plastic film does objects on the shop shelves. And its translucent appearance encouraged the popular comparison to 'the most beautiful marble you could imagine'.[70] The popularly perceived 'awesomeness' of the image is expressed by the astronomer Carl Sagan, who argued that *Blue Marble* conveyed the inconsequentiality of humans, as 'a thin film of life on an obscure and solitary lump of rock and metal'.[71] However, by contrast, we might instead suggest that the *Blue Marble* photograph conveyed the absolute consequentiality of humans, who are given a view of Earth as if it were a cup of coffee or a simple marble, designed for their pleasure and consumption.

On this understanding, these literal 'world pictures' deepen Heidegger's account of an Age of the World Picture: they introduce representations of the Earth that exclude directly phenomenal experience by limiting our apprehension of the planet to that of a marble, toy or jewel. This is a fetishized view of 'nature' that arguably best serves the mandates of advertising, because it provides a dazzling spectacle, blurring phenomenal 'natural' representation with the visual language of commodification: naturalizing and therefore concealing our Total Mobilization as consumers.

### polke as stupid

In the same year that *Earthrise* was snapped as part of Apollo 8's lunar orbit and rapidly cemented in the public's imagination, the German artist Sigmar Polke made a strange small 'goofball' style painting titled *Polke as Astronaut* (fig. 1.6).[72] This painting produced at the height of public euphoria for space travel provides a gleefully caustic perspective that sharply contrasts with the 'Whole Earth' ideology that had begun to suffuse through NASA's captivated audience. The small painting

[70] Michael Collins, James Irwin and Bill Anders cited in Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth*, 99.
[71] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 3.
[72] In a review of Polke's 2014 retrospective, 'Alibis', at MOMA in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Terry R. Myers refers to the painterly approach of this particular work as 'goofball', and thus willfully naïve, irreverent and careless. See Terry R. Myers, 'He-Who-Must-Be-Named is Sigmar Polke!', *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics, Culture* (May 6th 2014), http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/05/artseen/he-who-must-be-named-is-sigmar-polke, accessed 06/06/14.

comprises a balloon-like grinning face scrawled onto a space-themed patterned fabric. The astronaut is depicted as, in the words of Bice Curiger, 'an aimlessly drifting child's balloon'.[73] I saw the work in a major 2014-15 retrospective of Polke's extensive and eclectic catalogue of works (painting, sketches, film, sculpture, print) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, titled *Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963-2010*.[74] In the exhibition the work stood out as an especially diminutive and remarkably careless painting by the German artist, whose career, Donald Kuspit suggests, might be defined by the 'pursuit of unintelligibility' and meaninglessness.[75] The work was hung much higher than any other work in the room in what seemed like a gesture of curatorial whimsy; the picture mimicking the painted balloon form and made to appear as if it were so light, so meaningless and empty, so unaffected by the weight of gravity, that it had floated above everything else (fig. 1.7).

*Polke as Astronaut* is one of Polke's cloth paintings, or *Stoffbilder*, which superimpose painted subjects onto found cloth materials as background support. 'Black velvet, fake leopard skin, bed sheets and cheap *chinoiserie* silk', are all used, Benjamin Buchloh has suggested, to make works of 'deliriously bad taste'.[76] The cloth support in *Polke as Astronaut* is no different: it is most likely decorative material intended for use as curtains or bed sheets for a young NASA enthusiast - a distinctly mundane representation of the awesome scale of space flight. Polke's treatment of space travel domesticates it, situating it in the realm of mass popular consumption. The conquest of space by man is relegated to 'background' and made to seem entirely banal.

This technique of layering paint onto patterned fabric is linked to what is commonly seen as an instinctive, supposedly 'spiritual', euphoric and drug-fuelled period of Polke's career (from 1966 onwards), which followed his association with the Capitalist Realism movement in Germany. However, to my mind, *Polke as*

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[73] Bice Curiger, 'Accelerated Attention' in Margit Rowell ed., *Sigmar Polke: works on paper 1963-1974,* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 32.
[74] The show ran from April 9th to August 3rd 2014 at MOMA, and later travelled to the Tate Modern, London and then the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. See http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2014/polke, accessed 06/06/14.
[75] Donald Kuspit, 'At the Tomb of the Unknown Picture' in David Thistlewood ed., *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 92.
[76] Benjamin Buchloh, 'Parody and Appropriationin Picabia, Pop, and Polke' [1982], *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2003), 361.

*Astronaut* seems to collapse the two styles, i.e. the so-called 'spiritual' mode and Capitalist Realism, which are typically evaluated as antithetical.[77] Capitalist Realism is widely seen as a German correlate to American Pop Art, albeit with a more blatantly depressing interpretation of consumer culture. The characteristic works of Polke in this period are uncompromisingly bland. In 1963 he drew *Seife,* a scrawled picture of a bar of soap on a beige ground: the bar of soap inscribed with the word *Seife*. And that's it. 'Here', Kevin Power explains, 'there is nothing of Pop's hymn to commodities, nothing of Pop's preference for primary colours and nothing of Pop's finished shelf-clean appearance'.[78] Instead, postwar German consumerism is pictured as just another form of bureaucratic uniformity. With *Polke as Astronaut*, nonetheless, Polke produces an image that holds the 'banal' and the 'sublime' or 'euphoric' together. The peculiarity of the painting results from its fusing of these two tendencies within the artist's early career. Despite the work's bizarre, almost-abstract imagery and 'deliriously bad' spaceman-patterned fabric, *Polke as Astronaut* retains much of the character of his Capitalist Realism output. Polke employs an image of our planet triumphantly colonized by positivist 'modern science', and euphorically appropriated by communitarianism (as if it presented material proof of our collective ecological consciousness), and turns it into a symbol of stupid banality: indicated by the dumb grinning balloon face dominating the surface of the painting. The use of a domestic decorative fabric further accentuates this feeling and space travel seems no more urgent than the beige bar of soap in *Seife*.

What is at stake here may be drawn out by reflecting on a comparison with Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893): a painting with which it shares a formal similarity but starkly opposing 'world picture' (fig. 1.8). Munch's work is discussed in Jameson's seminal essay on 'Postmodernism', in which he establishes a contrast between the Norwegian artist's iconic modernist painting, exemplifying 'great modernist themes of anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation', and Andy Warhol's 'postmodern' euphoric style, illustrated by his *Diamond Dust Shoes*

[77] For instance, Donald Kuspit has suggested that the later, more spiritual or 'drugged-up', works look 'less inevitably banal, and more like sublime, suggestive screen memories' than the 'Capitalist Realism' style of work that was named so by Polke, Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg in 1963. Kuspit, 'At the Tomb of the Unknown Picture', 96.

[78] Kevin Power, 'Polke's Postmodern Play' in David Thistlewood ed., *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 105.

(1980).[79] However, in comparison with *Polke as Astronaut* an alternative periodization of the '60s and '70s emerges that is different from Jameson's famous periodization of 'postmodernism'. Indeed there is a 'stupid' aspect to *Polke as Astronaut* that can be can be contrasted to Munch just as Warhol is contrasted to him in Jameson's essay, albeit to different interpretative effect, with stupidity emerging more strongly than euphoria. For Jameson, *The Scream* is exemplary of an earlier modernist aesthetic with which the euphoric subject can no longer properly identify. Munch's gestural and expressionistic *Scream* represents the 'unhappy paradox' of the centered subject, whose 'self-sufficiency' comes at the cost of closing oneself off from the world: 'buried alive and condemned to a prison-cell without egress'.[80] Warhol, however, Jameson argues, represents an entirely different subject position: free floating and impersonal and pitifully incapable of experiencing the alienation depicted in *The Scream*. The subject in *Polke as Astronaut* is similarly free floating and impersonal (it is represented as a schematic face on a balloon), however, it also expresses an overt and gleeful dumbness, or stupidity. It is not cold and dispassionate, it is funny.

*The Scream* and *Polke as Astronaut* are both dominated by a single and centrally located figure. Indeed the distorted and trembling outline of the screaming subject's schematized mask-like face (in Munch) is repeated by Polke, and both works feature a background that seems to revolve around the central figure. Jameson describes 'great concentric circles' in *The Scream*, 'as on the surface of a sheet of water…which fan out from the sufferer'.[81] And in Polke, the background patterned fabric composition of astronauts, globes and lunar spacecraft seems to gravitate around the central head, as if some great black hole. However, the differences between the two works, quite clearly, stand out much more than their similarities. Polke's painting depicts the - here astral - subject as a dumb grinning balloon. And,

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[79] Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', http://newleftreview.org/I/146/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism, accessed 01/05/2014.

[80] Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', http://newleftreview.org/I/146/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism, accessed 01/05/2014.

[81] Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', http://newleftreview.org/I/146/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism, accessed 01/05/2014.

when looked at side by side, the bad-taste bed-sheet background in Polke's work seems to highlight the obsolescence and historic impossibility of the sort of background in Munch's painting, whose landscape records and transcribes the subject's suffering. The industrially-fabricated bed sheet, replete with graphic depictions of astronautical miscellanea, has nothing unique or personal about it. Moreover the face is simplified to a point of ridiculousness, where it is only capable of grinning and the floating balloon-form of the head, as if filled with helium, indicates an extreme emptiness: a subject severed from its bodily context, without agency (this concept of headlessness is further explored in Chapter Two in relation to the symbolism used to describe online forms of collectivity). The subject depicted here as an astronaut has no active role in the exploration of space. Polke's stupid grinning astronaut is not heroic. To the contrary, it is symptomatic of the aimless, free-floating consumer in late capitalism: a Heideggerian nightmare, who looks upon the fully 'enframed' Earth as if it were a beautiful blue marble. This is why, I think, *Polke as Astronaut* is an important representation of the 'world picture' – registering and making apparent its blurring of science, ecology and consumerism, which was embedded, although not immediately apparent, in NASA's images. Thus *Polke as Astronaut*, I want to claim, contains and accurately materializes, without pretense or illusion, the 'world picture' theorized by Heidegger and glimpsed in the first image of the Earth taken by the Lunar Orbiter 1 spacecraft. In addition, Polke's painting can be seen to anticipate the less heroic and more stupid 'world pictures' that we have now, which organize and inform our contemporary understanding of the world.

It is certainly the case that our current imagining of the world in the societies of Control is no longer symbolized by NASA's shots of the Earth in *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* from the '60s and early '70s. We no longer see the Earth as a bounty of resources (or 'standing reserve'), uniting us in a global community via a shared duty of care. Instead, we have entered a new situation, in which the Earth's productive resources are seemingly exhausted and the planet seems dangerous, threatening and hostile to our well-being. In line with this view, it is becoming increasingly accepted that our epoch can be correctly understood with the geologic time label 'Anthropocene'. This is proposed as an epoch of geological time in which it seems

that, for all intents and purposes, 'nature' as we understood it, is gone for good. As Robert Macfarlane writes, summarising the idea:

> [H]uman activity is considered such a powerful influence on the environment, climate and ecology of the planet that it will leave a long-term signature in the strata record...We have bored 50m kilometres of holes in our search for oil. We remove mountain tops to get at the coal they contain. The oceans dance with billions of tiny plastic beads. Weaponry tests have dispersed artificial radionuclides globally. The burning of rainforests for monoculture production sends out killing smog-palls that settle into the sediment across entire countries. We have become titanic geological agents, our legacy legible for millennia to come.[82]

This epochal shift has resulted in a definitively pessimistic worldview, or 'world picture', which anticipates a series of impending catastrophes: as if the Earth will begin to reject and attempt to extinguish our destructive human presence. Indeed some geologists have suggested that the Anthropocene may also mark the beginning of the 'sixth mass extinction'.[83] A 2015 article published in *The Anthropocene Review* outlines the current 'extinction crisis' and the possibility of a fundamental reshaping of the Earth's existing ecological makeup:

> We are now living through a phase of rapid acceleration in many geologically significant processes, notably as regards climate, ocean chemistry and biodiversity, and the changes that already have occurred in the Earth System approach those evident in the lead-up to the Cambrian Explosion [an explosion of diversity said to begin around 545 million years ago, which precipitated the appearance of complex, multi-celled organisms]. Hence, current trends, if maintained, would likely result in period - or even era - scale changes to the Earth System.[84]

In light of these developments, I want to ask what sort of literal 'world pictures' we have now? The 'world pictures' produced by NASA can be seen as a materialization of Heidegger's thoughts on 'Total Mobilization' in the Age of the World Picture despite their overwhelmingly positive, euphoric reception. *Polke as Astronaut*, whilst authentic of its historical moment, as I have argued, also seems prescient of a 'world

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[82] Robert Macfarlane, 'Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet for ever', *The Guardian* (April 2016), http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever, accessed 19/05/16.

[83] See Jeremy Hance, 'How humans are driving the sixth mass extinction', *The Guardian* (October 2015), http://www.theguardian.com/environment/radical-conservation/2015/oct/20/the-four-horsemen-of-the-sixth-mass-extinction, accessed 19/05/16.

[84] Mark Williams, Jan Zalasiewicz, PK Haff, Christian Schwägerl, Anthony D Barnosky and Erle C Ellis, 'The Anthropocene Biosphere', *The Anthropocene Review*, vol.2, no. 3 (December 2015), 18.

picture' that, in its simultaneous banality, comedy and stupidity, has much in common with our culture today. Indeed we might suggest that Jameson's account of the affectless subject in postmodernism, which coolly moves from sets of affective intensity, is insufficient to describe works such as *Polke as Astronaut* and many contemporary cultural phenomenons that are instead suggestive of a depressed subject, which finds relief in displays of stupidity. Turning now to the present, I want to ask what sorts of ideas are congealed within the 'world pictures' produced by our current social, technological and ecological conditions? What are the 'world pictures' that mediate our experience of the Anthropocene, and what sort of collective consciousness do they enable?

## planetary dysphoria

Heidegger suggested that the Age of the World Picture epitomized 'man's domination of the earth by means of his technological will'. I have argued that this was represented in NASA's photographs, which displayed the Earth as a finite, fixed and enclosed resource, or commodity even. Now I want to look at what we might understand as literal 'world pictures' from the last ten years: Google Earth and Red Bull's *Stratos* project, both of which share certain points of commonality with NASA's photographs whilst also indicating an entirely different planetary consciousness that is related to recent technological innovations and attendant shifts in our relationship to the Earth.

On start-up, the computer programme Google Earth begins with a slow, rotating drift towards the Earth from an unspecified location in outer space. We arrive at a view (fig. 1.9) as if from the perspective of the Apollo 17 crew, who in 1972 snapped the image that would become *Blue Marble*. The viewer of Google Earth however is given an active role in the planet's representation: he or she is like an extra-terrestrial pilot to whom the Earth is made available as a 'globe in practice'. By this, I mean that this particular image initiates a vision most associated with that of the pilot or 'airman'. This idea of a 'globe in practice' was first described by American poet and essayist Archibald MacLeish, who wrote that, for the airman, the world is conceived as 'a single sphere, a globe having the qualities of a globe, a round earth in which all the directions eventually meet, in which there is no center because every point, or

none, is center'.[85] This, he explains, is 'a globe in practice, not in theory'.[86] And so Google's Earth comes to us as a sphere: a round object in which all points, spatial and temporal (in 2009 a feature was released wherein the user can move back and forth in time and thus reveal changes over past decades) eventually meet one another. One can scroll from a deep ocean bathymetry to mountainous hypsometry in a smooth continuous movement. Moreover, we are given the ability to zoom in from the *Blue Marble* viewpoint, to a point beyond the highest zooming level of its map, arriving at the contentious 'Street View' level: a panoramic street-by-street representation of urban and rural environments stitched together from 360° photographic images taken by a fleet of specially adapted cars, tricycles, snowmobiles and boats.[87]

Google Earth's spectacular virtual globe, map and geographical information program has been downloaded well over one billion times.[88] Its software was

[85] Archibald MacLeish, 'The Image of Victory' [1944] quoted in Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination,* 246.

[86] MacLeish quoted in Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* 246.

[87] Google's Street View has been vigorously criticized as an invasion of privacy, and has been perceived by some national officials, and various special interest groups, as posing a threat to national security; for instance, through providing confidential visual and geographical information about military installations. In 2008 an Indian lawyer filed a suit against Google Earth, claiming that it was used to plan a terrorist attack in Mumbai, which killed 171 people. See Rahul Bedi, 'Mumbai attacks: Indian suit against Google Earth over image use by terrorists', *The Telegraph* (December 2008), http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/3691723/Mumbai-attacks-Indian-suit-against-Google-Earth-over-image-use-by-terrorists.html, accessed 17/06/14. In 2007 it was reported that Palestinian militants were using Google Earth to target their attacks in Israel. Indeed members of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a group aligned with the Fatah political party, admit to using the internet maing tool to help determine their targets for rocket strikes. See Clancy Chassay, 'Google Earth used to target Israel', *The Guardian*, (October 2007), http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2007/oct/25/google.israel, accessed 17/06/14. And *The Bling Ring* - a group of seven teenagers who robbed celebrity homes in the Hollywood Hills from 2008-2009 – famously used Twitter to track when their targets were away and Google Earth to plan their way into target's properties, and subsequent escape route. A member of The Bling Ring, Larry Getlin, writes that 'preparing for their crimes was simple. A Web site called Celebrity Address Aerial provided addresses, and Google Earth offered maps and pictures of celebrity homes, helping them determine easy points of entry'. Using this process The Bling Ring are reported to have stolen goods worth more than $3m. See Larry Gatlin, 'We'll always nab Paris', *New York Post* (May 2013), http://nypost.com/2013/05/19/well-always-nab-paris/ accessed 17/06/14.

[88] Google last published download statistics regarding Google Earth in October 2011, when it celebrated reaching more than one billion registered downloads. The company announced its achievement in histrionic fashion: 'How large is one billion? One billion hours ago modern humans were living in the Stone Age. One billion minutes ago, the Roman Empire was flourishing. If you travelled from Earth to the Moon three times, your journey would measure one billion meters… Today, we've reached our own one billion mark'. See http://googleblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/google-earth-downloaded-more-than-one.html, accessed 16/06/14.

originally called EarthViewer 3D, and was created by a private Silicon Valley company, Keyhole Inc. This company was funded by In-Q-Tel, a venture-capital arm of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which invests in Silicon Valley technology with the purpose of keeping the CIA equipped with the latest technological developments.[89] This software came to public prominence in 2003 when, in exchange for on-air exposure, war reports from Iraq on American news networks – CNN, ABC, CBS – were illustrated with its sophisticated 3D maps. For instance, on CNN, EarthViewer 3D was used to simulate a flight over Baghdad followed by a tour of the streets of the bombing targets.[90] The software, whose website was so overwhelmed by enthusiastic users following its on-air publicity that it crashed, was in 2004 acquired by Google. And, soon enough, EarthViewer 3D's form of global representation, which was primarily accustomed to illustrate and aid modern warfare, became a banal, utterly normal and domesticated part of our everyday visual diet. Indeed it has become one of the primary means by which we interact with the world.

Mark Dorrian's essay 'On Google Earth' makes clear that Google Earth's 'interface works through a principle of grasping'.[91] Our interaction with the object pivots on a hand icon, with which we can manoeuvre the Earth and navigate our perception of it through a process of grabbing and pinching. For Dorrian this intensifies the sense of the manipulability of the virtual object, and as such, is reminiscent of the 'cartographic tradition of miniature globes that we place our hands on and revolve'.[92] Indeed Google Earth might even represent a 'digital simulacrum' of these ornamental spinning globes.[93] This notion of grasping hints at the epistemic process Heidegger characterised as essential to 'modern science', and intensifies the effect of the earlier discussed 'world picture'. To grasp something refers to a process of understanding by seizing and holding on. When we grasp something, we are, to

[89] See Sarah Lacy, 'Meet The CIA's Venture Capitalist', *Bloomberg Business Week* (May 2005), http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2005-05-09/meet-the-cias-venture-capitalist, accessed 23/06/14.
[90] Kevin Maney, 'Tiny tech company awes viewers', *USA Today* (March 2003), http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/techinnovations/2003-03-20-earthviewer_x.htm, accessed 23/06/14.
[91] Mark Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', in.El Hadi Jazairy ed., *Scales of the Earth: New Geographies 4,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 167.
[92] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 167.
[93] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 167.

paraphrase Heidegger, 'the relational centre of that which is as such'.[94] In this sense, grasping only serves to seize the object within an always-already known object sphere. Indeed Google Earth seems the acme of Heidegger's 'representation' [*vor-stellen*], or 'setting in place' of nature. For instance, this graspable Earth is, unlike *Blue Marble* and *Earthrise* completely bereft of cloud coverage. 'The World ceases to have a dark side', Dorrian writes, 'and instead we have an entirely illuminated globe'.[95] The lack of clouds distances this Earth from earlier 'world pictures', whose clouds were interpreted by some commentators as a disorientating element that transcended the expected geophysical grid.[96] Google Earth enforces another form of interface: one that doesn't emphasise the sublime incalculability of our planet (an end toward which the clouds might be seen to operate in *Blue Marble*), but instead displays the apparatus, or non-diegetic space, through which the virtual image is achieved. We are always aware that we are observing a mechanically encircled Earth: pieced together from various fragments of image data. The preset representation of the Earth is covered by thin two-dimensional overlays containing icons, numbers, touristic points of interest and links to destination photographs. We are forcefully disengaged from any sort of euphoric exhilaration, or sense of awe. In other words there is a drain of affect, or loss of cathection to the world, whose representation here disavows any significant emotional investment or affective charge. Indeed Dorrian claims that even 'with the program's informational layers switched off, we can be under no illusion that this is any kind of "natural" image'.[97]

What is emphasised by this fragmented collection of geospatial data is a sense of total availability, or in Dorrian's words, 'searchability'.[98] Nothing is out of reach, nothing is unknown or beyond our grasp. It is as if the spectacular and readily mythologized images of the globe, such as the Apollo images, are now too simplistic and insufficiently satisfying. Indeed, four years before Google Earth was released, Denis Cosgrove, author of a book on the history of cartography, suggested that traditional representations of the globe could no longer signify the 'abstract values

[94] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 128.
[95] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 167.
[96] For example, see Kelsey, 'Reverse Shot: Earthrise and Blue Marble in the American Imagination', 10 – 16.
[97] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 167.
[98] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 167.

required in corporate advertising at the millennium'.[99] Cosgrove explains that the emergence of a 'frictionless capitalism' and an accompanying impression of the Earth as 'great planetary marketplace' required a different imagining of the planet.[100] This capitalism was to be conceived as a 'network of interconnecting lines signif[ying] communication between points that increasingly convey no material objects…virtual and purely informational, operating through satellites arrayed above the global surface and unconstrained by its physical barriers to flow'.[101] And as if responding to Cosgrove's analysis of the unconstrained and frictionless imagining of the Earth by corporate marketing, Google Earth emerged: offering its user uninhibited access to traverse the planet with an absolute absence of any physical barrier.

Similar to NASA's photographs, however, the mode of representation offered by Google Earth - without cloud coverage, totally searchable and visible, and overcoded with non-diegetic data - produces its own ideological mystification. By this, I mean that it intervenes in the individual's perception of the world, putting it in alliance with the global system of frictionless capitalism that Google Earth symbolizes. For this reason, the subject understands itself as increasingly 'motile'. This is a condition, Paul Virilio writes in *Open Sky* (1997), where the individual has 'limited his body's area of influence to a few gestures, a few impulses'.[102] This interactive being - hooked up to ultra-powerful communication and telecommunication tools - is, Virilio suggests, 'doomed to inertia…natural capacities for movement and displacement [are transferred] to probes and scanners which instantaneously inform him about a remote reality'.[103] Mobility is not important to the Google Earth user who is, more precisely, 'mobile on the spot'.[104] Virilio cites the rise of home shopping and working from home as paradigmatic examples of the emergence of this new subject, whose private space offers no sanctuary from the productive time of capital and who is now accordingly often confined to his or her home, condemned to immobility, having no

[99] Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination,* . 264.
[100] The phrases 'frictionless capitalism' and 'great planetary marketplace' are attributed to Bill Gates, the 'chairman of the most successful software provider of the 1990s'. Quoted in Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination,* 265.
[101] Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination,* 265.
[102] Paul Virilio, *Open Sky,* tr. Julie Rose (London; New York: Verso, 1997), 17.
[103] Virilio, *Open Sky*, 16.
[104] Virilio, *Open Sky*, 20.

good reason to leave. Google's totally searchable Earth, dense with detail and accessible on a personal screen upholds this idea of a 'motile' subject. Its user is allowed to 'swoop in like Superman from outer space', Dorrian writes, 'flying over the planet, while…continuing to fulfil…bureaucratic obligations below'.[105] This individual, simultaneously superhero and obedient worker, corresponds to what Virilio provocatively claims to be a technologically-driven disabilization of everyday life:

> this citizen-terminal soon to be decked to the eyeballs with interactive prostheses based on the pathological model of the spastic, wired to control his/her domestic environment without having physically to stir: the catastrophic figure of an individual who has lost the capacity for immediate intervention along with natural motricity and who abandons himself, for want of anything better, to the capabilities of captors, sensors and other remote control scanners that turn him into a being controlled by the machine with which, they say, he talks.[106]

Virilio's claim is premised upon the observation of emerging similarities between the technologically well-equipped disabled person and the technologically over-equipped able-bodied person. He argues that reduced mobility - in the former - and growing inertia - in the latter - is fast collapsing the distinction between able and disabled. Virilio draws this conclusion from a seemingly benign remark made by François Mitterand, at an international symposium on disability in Dunkirk, regarding the need for cities to adapt to and be made completely accessible for the physically challenged.[107] Virilio infers a technocratic underside to Mitterand's 'noble' display of generosity. In this understanding Mitterand's putative benevolence toward the disabled veiled a more general concession to neo-liberalism's frictionless capitalism, which is indifferent to our spatial mobility and only requires that we be connected to its network.[108] So, by the force of circumstance, the disabled subject becomes an imperative of capital. Whilst Virilio's characterisation is problematic from a

[105] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 164.
[106] Virilio, *Open Sky*, 20.
[107] Mitterand is quoted: 'Cities must adapt to their citizens and not the other way round. Let's open up the city to the physically challenged. I ask that an overall policy on the disabled be a firm axis of Europe as a social institution'. See Virilio, *Open Sky*, 21.
[108] This can also be seen as part of the so-called collapse of the former French President's reformist ambitions and social democratic ideals into a sweeping neoliberal program. This is detailed in Jonah Birch, 'The Many Lives of François Mitterrand', *Jacobin* (August 2015), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/francois-mitterrand-socialist-party-common-program-communist-pcf-1981-elections-austerity/, accessed 22/01/16.

disability studies perspective, we can at least take from his argument the idea of us delegating or surrendering our mobility to technical systems. This can be glimpsed, for instance, in the Japanese phenomena of *hikikomori* (meaning acute social withdrawal), which like Baudrillard's analysis of obesity in America in the 1980s, can be seen to represent an 'excess of conformity' to cultural norms.[109] 'According to figures released by the Japanese government, as of 2010', Franco Berardi writes, '700,000 individuals, with an average age of thirty-one, have made the decision to sever all relations with the outside world, in order to live their lives from behind the locked door of their own room'.[110] Their only point of contact with a world outside their cramped and cluttered rooms is via electronic screens. Moreover this motile subject is an imperative of the military in the West: its pilots are now operators of remote-controlled Predator and Reaper drones. 'While previously the physical prowess of the pilots was an integral part of their public identity', Hito Steyerl writes, now their 'physical performance has become secondary and their own mobility is not a decisive factor'.[111] More prosaically, Dorrian also suggests that the process by which we engage with Google Earth is symbolic of our contemporary consumer habits. This is premised on the fact of the Earth's 'searchability'.

'Searchability' refers to the way that we engage with Google Earth: clicking and zooming into our specified target. This functions as a form of shopping. 'The promise here', Dorrian explains, 'is of a kind of virtuous circle of mutual targeting whereby Google Earth permits the commodity to target, via advertising, the cybertourist cum satellite-consumer, and then in turn to be spatially targeted by her'.[112] The total illumination of the globe on display and its overt constructedness

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[109] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* [1983], tr. Philie Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 47.

[110] 'These people are officially defined as *hikikomori*, according to diagnostic criteria such as: 1) spending most of the day and nearly every day confined to home; 2) marked and persistent avoidance of social situations; 3) symptoms interfering significantly with the person's normal routine, occupational (or academic) functioning, or social activities or relationships; 4) perceiving the withdrawal as ego-syntonic; 5) having a duration of at least six months; and 6) having no other mental disorder that accounts for the social withdrawal and avoidance. According to the estimates of the Ministry of Health of Japan, an additional 1.55 million people are on the verge of becoming *hikikomori*'. Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass-Murder and Suicide* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), 159 – 160.

[111] Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment', in Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh and Jill Winder eds, *On Horizons: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, (Rotterdam: BAK and Post Editions, 2011), 183.

[112] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 66.

(here I'm referring to the image's highly visible apparatus of non-diegetic data) enunciates the wholeness of its searchability. For Dorrian, this is how we should understand its total dispersal of clouds: 'for everything that retards vision tends to be drained away'.[113] We are given a total range of vision that turns everything into a potential target or searchable commodity. Furthermore this instrumentalization of a 'world picture' for the purpose of shopping is actively reconfiguring the physical landscape as a media surface on which to advertise. For instance, Robert Smithson's topographical intervention *Spiral Jetty* (1970) which revealed itself predominately from an aerial perspective can now be seen as a precedent to a mode of advertising that directs itself toward a satellite intermediary, in order to be seen by the consumer on Google Earth. This includes KFC's famous 87,500 square foot Colonel Sanders logo in Nevada (removed in 2007, but still visible on Google Earth if the timeline scale is scrolled back to circa 2006) and a trend for rooftops as billboards.[114] For Dorrian, what Google Earth ultimately facilitates is a circle of mutual targeting between commodity and consumer, within which the consumer doesn't have to move. Virilio's disabled person is normalized because we are encouraged to perceive the Earth in terms of its 'searchability'. This feature represents a further advance on the way in which, as I earlier argued, NASA's images of the Earth smuggled within them a consumerist ideology.

In order to build on Dorrian's interpretation, I want to ask what other insights Google Earth offers into our contemporary understanding of the world: acknowledging that it is both empowering, ultra-useful and at the same time symptomatic of Virilio's thoughts on disability. In particular, I want to highlight Google Earth's aesthetic register. I earlier mentioned that its mode of representation forcefully removes us from any sense of the euphoric exhilaration that characterised NASA's Apollo images. In this respect, a more likely response to a fragmented global image overcoded with non-diegetic tools for instantaneous targeting is not

[113] Dorrian, 'On Google Earth', 167.
[114] Whilst the popularity of 'mapvertising' or 'astrovertisements' soared following the public release of Google Earth, it is not a contemporary innovation. In 1965 a 'Readymix' logo was carved into the Australian desert covering an area one-mile wide by two-miles across. Nevertheless the popularity of this form of marketing has certainly increased with Google Earth. See Alex Turnbull, 'The Real First and Largest Logo Visible From Space', *Google Sightseeing* (November 2006), http://googlesightseeing.com/2006/11/the-real-first-largest-logo-visible-from-space/, accessed 20/08/14.

euphoria, but dysphoria: a feeling that refers to the total evacuation of euphoria.

There is nothing designed to immerse, wow and exhilarate the user within Google Earth. We can experience history on Google Earth through its time slider, and access aerial views of local environments from certain 'acquisition dates' throughout twentieth-century history. 'Real' history is not displaced with an immersive 'history of aesthetic styles', as in, for instance, the nostalgia-trend cinema cited as 'euphoric' and emblematic of postmodernism by Jameson, but instead displaced with a uniform, searchable and nondescript interface. We might say that postmodern 'nostalgia' imagery operates through evoking a lost object of desire (the Lacanian *objet petit a*): a representation of history as 'chimerical object of fantasy', which, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, causes 'our desire and at the same time…materializes the void of our desire'.[115] This might be the depressing truth of the postmodern object and the depressing truth of the postmodern subject's 'euphoria'. However the experience of Google Earth appears to represent an advance or stage beyond the postmodern media discussed by Jameson: there is no phantasmic register to Google Earth's imagery, no attempt to achieve or fabricate a sense of transparency or immediacy. In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), Jay David Bolter and Robert Grusin write that this 'immediate' mode of representation is one where the media object operates 'to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium (canvas, photographic film, cinema and so on) and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation'.[116] And so, we might add, function as an *objet petit a*. This for instance, is applicable to NASA's photographs of the Earth from space. However with Google Earth's mode of representation there is no attempt to hide the 'void behind our desire'. It is 'hyper-immediate': a new-media 'style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium'.[117] The user is constantly made aware of the apparatus: indicating, perhaps, Google's comfort with the knowledge that their user no longer requires a 'chimerical object of fantasy' in order to cover up the 'void' that defines their desire to search its globe. The euphoric aesthetic of the 'world pictures' of the '60s and '70s has

[115] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* [1989] (London; New York: Verso, 2008), 69.
[116] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 2000), 272-273.
[117] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media,* 272-273.

disappeared: Google Earth, by contrast, is depressing. It has a dysphoric aesthetic that can be seen to correspond to a wider planetary dysphoria, which is itself symptomatic of a worldview informed by the Anthropocene.

'Planetary dysphoria' is a term coined by the critic Emily Apter that defines 'a variation on Melanie Klein's '"depressive position" [experience of guilt, grief, helplessness and dependency towards the object, initially the mother] suffusing every aspect of economic, social and terrestrial life'.[118] It refers to a process by which the Earth's impoverishment is internalized by the individual, who then – paraphrasing Freud on melancholia – experiences a 'delusional expectation of punishment'.[119] Dysphoria, she writes, 'denotes an unpleasant or uncomfortable mood: sadness, a downer moment, anxiety, restlessness, irritability, spleen, manic swings, withdrawal…and the total evacuation of euphoria'.[120] The dysphoric individual is unreceptive to euphoric intensities because he or she is exhausted or too depressed. Apter observes a particular sort of 'planetary aesthetic' in contemporary culture: this is a 'world picture' that 'captures the geopsychoanalytic state of the world at its most depressed and *unruhig*'.[121] This aesthetic is 'informed by a newfound sensitivity to the real and imagined processes of the earth's destruction and the end of life as we know it'.[122] The planet is conceived as 'an environmental death-trap afflicted by radiation, pandemics, dust and stellar burnout'.[123] Google Earth provides a comparably depressing conception of the planet: an image of the Earth that has come to replace the increasingly cataclysmic world around us – one that is fully explored, mediated and rendered as a 3D interactive world, locking us in as pitiful consumers, symbolizing our increasingly total *im*mobilization.

## suicide from the edge of space

To further demonstrate this 'planetary dysphoria', I'm going to come to my final example: Red Bull's *Stratos* project (2012) and the cultural phenomenon of extreme

[118] Emily Apter, 'Planetary Dysphoria', *Third Text*, Volume 27, Issue 1 (2013), 139.
[119] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1917] tr. Joan Riviere in ed. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (Hogarth, London: 1995), 244.
[120] Apter, 'Planetary Dysphoria', 139.
[121] Apter, 'Planetary Dysphoria', 140.
[122] See 'abstract' for Apter, 'Planetary Dysphoria'.
[123] Apter, 'Planetary Dysphoria', 134.

sports. I want to read these popular activities as symptomatic of the 'delusional expectation of punishment' that results from an increasingly dysphoric worldview. In effect, they dramatically exemplify this dysphoria with progressively more suicidal-seeming experiments, which can be seen to put our contemporary culture in touch with the history of sacrifices, suicide and death that was theorized by Georges Bataille in the 1930s and also addressed more recently by Baudrillard. All great world-historic events appear twice, Marx writes, 'the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce'.[124] Red Bull's *Stratos,* I want to claim, is the 'farce' that corresponds to NASA's iconic 'world pictures'. Indeed it produced a picture of the world whose sheer spectacle rivals, and arguably exceeds NASA's images from the '60s and '70s. However, with Red Bull the state-sponsored conquest and photographing of the Earth from space for political purposes (Cold War posturing) and modern scientific advancement shifts to a corporate-sponsored conquest for the purpose of a marketing exercise-cum-*Jackass*-type stunt.

On 14th October 2012 Red Bull achieved their goal to drop someone from the edge of the stratosphere (or as the event was marketed – 'from the edge of space') into freefall without vehicular support.[125] The stunt was streamed in real-time on YouTube, and in doing this the Austrian parachutist, skydiver and BASE jumper Felix Baumgartner set a number of world records.[126] These records were ratified by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale and accounted for 'Maximum Vertical Speed', 'Exit Altitude' and 'Vertical Distance of Freefall'.[127] Baumgartner's journey began in Roswell, USA, where he lifted off in a pressurized capsule attached to a large helium balloon. At an altitude of 38969.4m (24 miles), he exited the capsule and fell down to earth towards a specific target zone. Baumgartner, wearing a

[124] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' [1852], *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm, accessed 26/08/14.

[125] The stratosphere is the second major layer of the Earth's atmosphere and extends to a height of around thirty miles. It is particularly appropriate for a filmed stunt because it has 'very stable atmospheric conditions and is almost completely free of clouds or other forms of weather'. See http://www.weather-climate.org.uk/02.php, accessed 26/01/16.

[126] BASE is an acronym standing for four categories of fixed objects from which one can jump: building, antenna, span, and Earth (cliff). The late BASE jumper Ueli Gegenschatz has described it as 'the ultimate feeling of being in free fall'. See Ueli Gegenschatz 'Extreme Wingsuit Flying', *TED* (February 2009), http://www.ted.com/talks/ueli_gegenschatz_extreme_wingsuit_jumping, accessed 24/06/14.

[127] 'Baumgartner's Records Ratified by FAI!', *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* (February 2013), http://www.fai.org/records/news-of-records/37017-baumgartners-records-ratified-by-fai, accessed 23/06/14.

specially designed pressurized suit, fell without the aid of any support other than air for a distance of 36402.6m (22.6 miles). He reached the maximum speed of 1357.6 km/h (843.6 mph) before opening his parachute and drifting down to his target. This speed also made him the first person to break the sound barrier without vehicular power or support.

Red Bull is an Austrian company whose product (a globally popular energy drink) is fairly insignificant. More important than the drink they produce is the brand or lifestyle they market, which involves consuming the drink. The eponymous beverage was based on a pre-existing Thai drink: Krating Daeng, whose logo displays two charging red bulls against a backdrop of the sun. Red Bull's co-founder Dietrich Mateschitz encountered the drink in 1982 and slightly rebranded the product for distribution on the global market (it was initially released in Austria in 1987 and became globally popular in the late 1990s and 2000s). 'We don't bring the product to the people', Mateschitz explains, '[w]e bring people to the product. We make it available and those who love our style come to us'.[128] An article in *The Economist* glosses Mateschitz's marketing, which 'launched the brand by persuading students to drive around in Minis and Beetles with a Red Bull can strapped on top, or to throw Red Bull parties around weird and wonderful themes. The company's only advertisements are a series of whimsical television cartoons'.[129] In this respect, Red Bull is a fundamentally post-industrial enterprise in that all the company produces is symbolic value. It is a marketing machine for the brand's self-promotion through extreme sports events, sponsorship and sports team ownerships. The *Stratos* project was one such event. They streamed the freefall 'from the edge of space' live on their YouTube channel, and broke another - non-sporting – record: becoming the 'live stream with the most concurrent views ever on YouTube' (at peak it had over eight million concurrent views).[130] The stunt was estimated to be worth 'tens of millions of dollars' for Red Bull. Indeed, an article in Forbes magazine claimed that the 'sponsorship transcended sports and entertainment into Pop Culture, hitting new

[128] Dietrich Mateschitz quoted in [uncredited author] 'Selling Energy', *The Economist* (May 2002), http://www.economist.com/node/1120373, accessed 27/01/16.
[129] [uncredited author] 'Selling Energy', http://www.economist.com/node/1120373, accessed 27/01/16.
[130] Anita Li, 'Final Numbers Are In: Space Jump Breaks YouTube Record', *Mashable* (October 2012), http://mashable.com/2012/10/15/space-jump-youtube-record/, accessed 23/06/14.

consumers that Red Bull does not usually capture, and on a global scale'.[131] Sports, entertainment and media-marketing mogul Ben Sturner, quoted in the article, enthused that the project's 'value for Red Bull is in the tens of millions of dollars of global exposure, and Red Bull Stratos will continue to be talked about and passed along socially for a very long time'.[132]

However, I want to suggest that the most striking aspect of the jump was the way in which it pictured the Earth (whilst the stunt did not technically take place outside of the Earth's atmosphere, the exit altitude provided the impression of looking down on the Earth from space). Rather than the fixed perspective of NASA's photographs or the continuous aerial viewpoint operative in Google Earth, here we had access to a much more dynamic perspective. Baumgartner's capsule was equipped with nine high-definition (HD) cameras, and his pressure suit with three HD cameras, one on each thigh and one on the chest pack. An optical ground tracking camera system with high power zoom lenses was also used to track Baumgartner's descent. From the perspective of the viewer, we were able to see Baumgartner fall towards the Earth's surface; the panoply of HD real-time imaging equipment allowing for a spectacularly embodied representation of the zoomed-in targeting that takes place on Google Earth. At the exit altitude we were streamed footage of Baumgartner: the camera positioned within the confined - six-foot diameter - spherical capsule so that we saw over the jumper's shoulder. As the capsule's rotational door rolled open we were given a remarkable view of the Earth: its curvature visible, dividing an aerial view of the Earth's surface from the mesosphere portion of the planet's atmosphere (above the stratosphere), which appears as black as deep space. Before Baumgartner's departure, he stood precariously on a platform outside the capsule. From here it was possible to glimpse a Google Earth-style aerial view from just above the jumper. So we saw Baumgartner, as if on a diving board, with the Earth's surface stretching to the edges of the screen's space (fig. 1.10). Baumgartner here seemed to occupy a

[131] Ben Sturner quoted in Darren Heitner, 'Red Bull Stratos Worth Tens of Millions of Dollars in Global Exposure for the Red Bull Brand', *Forbes* (October 2012), http://www.forbes.com/sites/darrenheitner/2012/10/15/red-bull-stratos-worth-tens-of-millions-of-dollars-in-global-exposure-for-the-red-bull-brand/, accessed 20/08/14.

[132] Sturner quoted in Heitner, 'Red Bull Stratos Worth Tens of Millions of Dollars in Global Exposure for the Red Bull Brand', http://www.forbes.com/sites/darrenheitner/2012/10/15/red-bull-stratos-worth-tens-of-millions-of-dollars-in-global-exposure-for-the-red-bull-brand/, accessed 20/08/14.

viewpoint normally the privilege of unmanned communications satellites. After a short premeditated speech ('sometimes you have to get up really high, to see how small you are; I'm coming home now') that recalled Neil Armstrong's famous words during the moon landing, albeit a more individualistic version (Armstrong referenced mankind, Baumgartner references only himself), he stepped off the platform and fell. Mission control confirmed over the radio 'Jumper away'. As Baumgartner entered his freefall, the image switched to the chest-pack mounted HD camera, which provided a near-enough point of view (POV) style representation of the Google Earth zoom toward a target zone. The Earth's spherical surface had the effect of twisting, heaving and mutating as Baumgartner dropped through its atmosphere: gravity pulling the mass of his body towards its terminal velocity. Interestingly, our perception of the Earth did not open up in accordance with Baumgartner's position relative to the Earth's surface, rather the streamed image generated a much more dizzy perspective: a point of view totally alien to Google Earth's linear zoom. The view was distorted and wavered between geographic detail and abstract fluidity (fig. 1.11).

Virilio describes, in *Open Sky*, the perspective of a 'freefall specialist'. He writes of the sudden magnification of vision that results from drastic acceleration. This is what seems to account for the bizarre representation of the Earth from Baumgartner's chest-pack mounted camera as he rushes towards terminal velocity – a speed of 843.6mph reached in 42 seconds. Virilio mentions the particular rush of perception induced by a parachutist's freefall as a metaphor for the shifts in perception that occur within the spatiotemporally accelerated conditions of experience provided by the telepresence of electronic screen-based technologies. He includes a description of 'eyeballing' the fall in progress ('eyeballing' is a parachuting term which refers to the assessment during free fall of the moment the parachute should be opened without reference to the altimeter) that, I think, helpfully illustrates the POV experience of Baumgartner's jump:

> Eyeballing consists in visually assessing the distance between you and the ground the whole time you are falling. You evaluate your height and work out the exact moment you need to open your parachute based on a *dynamic visual impression*. When you are flying in a plane at an altitude of 600 metres, you don't have anything like the visual impression you have when you clear this altitude in a

> high-speed vertical fall. When you are at 2,000 metres, you can't see the ground approaching. But when you reach the 800 to 600 metre mark, you start to see it "coming". The sensation becomes scary pretty quickly because of ground rush, the ground rushing up at you. The apparent diameter of objects increases faster and faster and you suddenly have the feeling you are not seeing them getting closer but seeing them move apart suddenly, as though *the ground were splitting open*.[133]

So the freefall appears as a 'headlong rush of perception', where 'all geometric dimensions connect: at first the ground seems to come up, then to open up; the arrival of a surface is followed by the spreading of the vanishing lines of a volume, anticipating flattening at the point of impact'.[134] In this respect, Virilio's compelling description of the freefall specialist's view can also be seen to describe the view of a suicide jumper: the 'point of impact' signifying for the viewer the vicarious thrill of death. Whilst Baumgartner's perilous exercise seems to share Google Earth's representation of the planet (an embodiment of its dynamic search process), it does not share its impression of an Earth 'grasped' and made manipulable (exemplified by its small hand icon, with which one can take hold of the earth and spin it). By contrast, the eyeballer-type view creates the impression of 'the ground splitting open'. Whilst we might argue that there is an implicit euphoria in this experience related to an overcoming of our fears, perhaps, I want to maintain that the thrill offered up to us is bound up with the real-time of a freefalling body, the real-pull of gravity and impending death. Virilio writes of the freefall as an 'experiment on the inertia of a body pulled by its mass: it is what happens prior to its indefinite annihilation upon ground impact'.[135] In this understanding, the extreme sensations offered by extreme sports, such as BASE jumping, are suicidal experiments 'with no other aim than that of experiencing the heaviness of the body'.[136]

The allure of Red Bull's *Stratos,* and arguably all other extreme sports in this account, resides in its performance of a suicidal action. In this respect, I am echoing Baudrillard's argument in *America* (1986) about the New York marathon. 'I would never have believed that the New York marathon could move you to tears', he writes:

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[133] Marc Défourneaux quoted in Virilio, *Open Sky*, 29.
[134] Virilio, *Open Sky*, 30.
[135] Virilio, *Open Sky*, 30.
[136] Virilio, *Open Sky*, 30 - 31

> In driving rain, with helicopters circling overhead and the crowd cheering, wearing aluminium foil capes and squinting at their stop-watches, or bare-chested, their eyes rolling skywards, they are all seeking death, that death by exhaustion that was the fate of the first Marathon man some two thousand years ago. And he, let us not forget, was carrying a message of victory to Athens. They also dream no doubt of bringing a victory message, but there are too many of them and their message has lost all meaning: it is merely the message of their arrival, at the end of their exertions, the twilight message of a futile, superhuman effort…The marathon is a form of demonstrative suicide, suicide as advertising: it is running to show you are capable of getting every last drop of energy out of yourself…[137]

Likewise, Red Bull's sponsored extreme sports events can be seen as forms of 'demonstrative suicide', which allow its participants to act out or perform their own death, and allow viewers to do so by proxy. Indeed, for some unfortunate extreme sport specialists their acts of 'demonstrative suicide' have been realised whilst under Red Bull's employ: thus pitifully falling short of its famous company slogan – 'Red Bull Gives You Wings'. In a trailer for Red Bull's *Human Flight 3D* film, a group of proximity flyers (a variation of BASE jumping, where the jumper wears a 'wingsuit', the aim being to fly as close to the faces and ridges of mountains as possible) are gathered around a table discussing the next perilous jump:

> C'mon we don't need to do this. It's insane, it's suicide guys!
>
> We got an obligation to push the envelope in this sport…
>
> Don't be such a wuss!
>
> We gotta' do it
>
> It's true.[138]

Needless to say, the jump was suicide. The individual who claims an 'obligation to push the envelope' despite the overwhelming threat of suicidal death was freefall specialist Eli Thompson, who was later killed on a jump in the Swiss Alps. This so-called obligation to complete the stunt, or to just do it - to not be 'a wuss!' - is also referenced in Baudrillard's observations of the New York marathon. It is, he writes, 'the mania for an empty victory, the joy engendered by a feat that is of no

[137] Jean Baudrillard, *America* [1986], tr. Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 1988), 20 -21.
[138] Transcribed from *Red Bull - Human Flight 3D Movie [trailer],* (March 2010), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJOqnpHxDEQ, accessed 24/06/14.

consequence'.[139] This is about doing something to merely prove to yourself that you can do it: a maniacal desire to prove that you exist, or in the case of Thompson, existed. However, Thompson's was not an isolated occurrence of death under Red Bull's supervision. In 2009 the 'extreme-skier' and BASE jumper Shane McConkey died in the Dolomite Mountains in Italy, after freefalling for 12 seconds and failing to deploy his parachute.[140] And, again in 2009, BASE jumper Ueli Gegenschatz died after making a 'PR parachute jump from 88 metres high' as part of the launch of Red Bull's venture into mobile phone technology.[141] The actual threat of death, it seems, is essential to the marketing of the energy drink. And this, communications scientist Norbert Bolz explains, is a highly lucrative 'marketing strategy where there is no competition, nobody else dares endorse the dangerous life like this'.[142] For all intents and purposes, Red Bull has fully realised Baudrillard's notion of 'suicide as advertising'.

*Stratos* did not result in death. Furthermore, as one would expect, efforts were made to subdue this potential outcome from the overall spectacle. Firstly, the initial launch date was aborted because of unfavourable weather conditions: a display of caution not always demonstrated by Red Bull, who have come under criticism for pressuring their athletes to perform in adverse weather conditions. Secondly, the jump was made for live-viewing on YouTube. However it was streamed with a twenty second delay, in case of accident. This is called 'broadcast delay' and is commonly used for live television in order to prevent profanities or violence from making it to air. Whilst the stunt surely had viewers staring in open-mouthed horror at the jump's absurd exit altitude, from which the Earth's atmospheric edge appeared visible, a direct experience of death was never in the offing for the viewers. For instance, when Baumgartner enters a potentially fatal uncontrolled spin after the first minute of the jump, we don't feel anxious or overly concerned: it is merely a brief

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[139] Baudrillard, *America*, 21.

[140] See Tim Mutrie, 'Statement from JT Holmes', *ESPN X Games* (June 2009), http://xgames.espn.go.com/skiing/article/4021669/statement-jt-holmes, accessed 24/06/14.

[141] Stefan Hohler, 'Ueli Gegenschatz ist tot', *Tages Anzeiger* (November 2009), http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/panorama/leute/Ueli-Gegenschatz-ist-tot/story/28637980, accessed 24/06/14.

[142] Prof. Norbert Bolz transcribed from 'The Dark Side of Red Bull – The Perils of Extreme Sport', *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (August 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4cNIvzDSr8, accessed 24/06/14.

period of heightened drama in a journey whose success is already assured. What we see are images that have already been screened, OK'd and verified by a team of supervisors. In this respect, there isn't anything immediately at stake. Nonetheless, Red Bull does seem to inherit the iconography and sadomasochistic pleasure that is historically associated with death and ritualistic sacrifice. In the late 1930s Georges Bataille wrote an essay on the 'joy' one might feel before death. Bataille conceives this joy as a kind of *epiphylogenetic* retention: something that is retained and passed on throughout the generations despite historical change.[143] Thus, he writes, the practice of joy before death rediscovers 'naïve forms that antedate the intrusion of a servile morality'.[144] Indeed, a short passage of Bataille's essay might be seen to describe the joy felt by the 'eyeballing' freefall specialist who witnesses the Earth *splitting open*:

> "I AM joy before death.
> Joy before death carries me.
> Joy before death hurls me down.
> Joy before death annihilates me."
>
> "I slowly lose myself in unintelligible and bottomless space.
> I reach the depths of worlds.
> I am devoured by death.
> I am devoured by fever.
> I am absorbed in somber space.
> I am annihilated in joy before death."[145]

This idea of an *epiphylogenetic* joy and pleasure in death is also referenced in Michael Serres's writing on the trace of ritualistic sacrifice in contemporary times. He discusses this in *Statues* (1993) and in his published conversation with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (1995). Serres's argument is premised on the NASA Challenger disaster (January 28th 1986), when a Space

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[143] 'Epiphylogenetic' is a termed used by Bernard Stiegler to discuss the process by which the structures, systems and apparatuses of society (such as language, religion, family structure etc.) are perpetuated and passed on between generations. He writes that '[t]hese arrangements are suorted by…*epiphylogenetic* strata or tertiary retentions. That is to say, the *concretions* of knowledge and abilities in objects and devices passed on as *things belonging to the human world*'. He cites the 'builder's shovel or a pitchfork' as an example; they 'have no mnemonic function, but they nevertheless bear the memory of gestures and functions…' Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Vol 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, tr. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Wiley, 2014), 7.

[144] Georges Bataille, 'The Practice of Joy Before Death' in Allan Stoekl ed., *Visions of Excess Selected Writings; 1927 – 1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 237.

[145] Bataille, 'The Practice of Joy Before Death', 237.

Shuttle broke apart 73 seconds into its flight, killing all crew members, whilst being streamed live on CNN. The cause of this disaster was famously demonstrated by theoretical physicist, Richard Feynman, in a televised hearing. Feynman simply plunged a sample of the Shuttle's (not fit for purpose) sealing material into a beaker of liquid nitrogen to show its lack of resilience. This served to illustrate that the integrity of the Shuttle's fuel rocket booster was critically impaired by the sub-zero weather conditions during launch. Feynman argued that this fault was known and, in an appendix to a commissioned report on the accident, he explained that 'there are enormous differences of opinion as to the probability of a failure with loss of vehicle and of human life. The estimates range from roughly 1 in 100 to 1 in 100,000. The high figures come from the working engineers, and the very low figures from management'.[146] This point, that the potentially suicidal risk was known and internalised by management, allows Serres to draw parallels between this explosion and the ancient Carthaginian practice of enclosing humans in a giant statue of the god Baal (who is, incidentally, symbolically represented with an image of a bull), and immolating them. 'Denial', Roxanne Lapidus writes in the book's translator's note, 'played a large role in both events. Since the Carthaginians incinerated both animals and children in their statue of Baal, even the parents of the sacrificed children allegedly denied that the cries they heard were those of humans'.[147] Lapidus, glossing Serres's argument, asserts that '[w]e are engaging in a similar form of denial…when we say that the Challenger explosion was an accident; such accidents, he insists, are predictable, according to the laws of probability'.[148]

Seen from this perspective, Feynman's statistics regarding the differences of opinion between the engineers and NASA's management figures reveal that modern science and its technologies contain shadowy traces of archaic violence. Serres

[146] Richard Feynman, 'Appendix F - Personal observations on the reliability of the Shuttle', *Report of the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident* (1986), http://science.ksc.nasa.gov/shuttle/missions/51-l/docs/rogers-commission/Aendix-F.txt, accessed 25/06/14

[147] Roxanne Lapidus, 'Translator's Note', in *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, tr. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), no page reference.

[148] Lapidus in *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, no page reference.

concludes that 'Baal is in the *Challenger*, and the *Challenger* is in Baal'.[149] Other similarities between the two events 'include the immense cost to the respective societies in erecting these "statues", the active role of "specialists" (scientists/priests) in setting the event in motion, the presence of a large crowd of onlookers, who witness the events open-mouthed in horror, and the repetitive nature of the event (replayed again and again on television screens; actively repeated in Carthage whenever national events seemed to require it)'.[150] And so, whilst we typically understand 'modern science' to have overcome archaic forms of consciousness and behaviour, Serres suggests that these are in fact sedimented within our social structures, systems and apparatuses and destined to repeat themselves. Indeed he provocatively claims that '[w]e are ancient in most of our actions and thoughts'.[151]

Certainly, the moving image streamed onto our computer screen of Felix Baumgartner exiting his support vehicle and perched on the edge of a horrific precipice carries a trace of archaic violence and ritualistic sacrifice. He then falls for our pleasure - a 'joy before death' by proxy. However, *Stratos* doesn't have the same heroic aspect as Bataille's account of death. For Bataille the 'practice of joy before death' enacts a resistance to social servitude: tragically representing, he writes, the 'only intellectually honest route in the search for ecstasy'.[152] By contrast, there was nothing at stake for the *Stratos* project as a whole; it was not done in pursuit of any great hope or ambition. It was done for publicity. The jump was a massively expensive, extraordinarily innovative and absolutely empty gesture: a feat of no consequence. For the viewer, however, it allowed the vicarious experience of a suicide jump: the thrill of plummeting to your point of impact and annihilation whilst sat at a computer screen. This re-emergence or revival of an *epiphylogenetic* 'joy before death' can be seen as a symptom of our dysphoric 'world picture' - a sign of the 'delusional expectation of punishment' that comes with a depressed outlook on the world.

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[149] Michel Serres in *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time,* 160.
[150] Lapidus in *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time,* no page reference.
[151] Serres in *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, . 138.
[152] Bataille, 'The Practice of Joy Before Death', 236.

Perhaps this is also true of the enthusiasm for extreme sports within white collar corporate work culture, which is sometimes referred to as 'extreme work' due to its tendency to overwhelm and dominate people's lives with 'relentless bottom-line pressures'.[153] This 'extreme work' is arguably what Red Bull's energy drink really fuels. Recent market research data suggests that the 'millennials - specifically the older millennials in the 27–37 years age group - have emerged as the key consumers of energy drinks…According to a recent survey by Mintel, 64% of the older millennials are consuming energy drinks'.[154] These are the workers enmeshed in an 'extreme work' culture, whose long hours and relentless demands are galvanized by Red Bull's potent mix of caffeine, taurine, B vitamins, sugar and Alpine spring water. It is these workers who also pursue extreme sports in their 'downtime' - bungee jumping on the weekend or skydiving during a short holiday. 'Marilyn, a senior banker at a London-based investment bank, was captivated by extreme sports', Sylvia Ann Hewlett & Carolyn Buck Luce write in an article on 'extreme work' in the Harvard Business Review:

> skydiving, snowboarding, triathlons, bungee jumping, surfing, mountaineering - anything that provided a rush of adrenaline and an element of danger. She eagerly recommended Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (an account of an ill-fated trip by amateur mountain climbers) as a window into why people push themselves to the limits of their physical endurance. Marilyn saw parallels between extreme sports and her life as an investment banker. First, there were the extraordinary time demands and performance stressors. Seventy-hour workweeks, grueling travel requirements, and relentless bottom-line pressures constantly pushed her to her limits—both physically and intellectually. Second, there was the allure of the job. Much like extreme sports, investment banking was exhilarating and seductive. Marilyn told us, "It gives me this rush. Like a drug, it's addictive."[155]

[153] I take this phrase 'extreme work' from an article in the Harvard Business Review, which refers to the commonplace idea of an 'all-consuming career' in the contemporary corporate world. See Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce, 'Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek', *Harvard Business Review* (December 2006), https://hbr.org/2006/12/extreme-jobs-the-dangerous-allure-of-the-70-hour-workweek, accessed 28/01/16.

[154] Sharon Bailey, 'Energy Drinks Continue to Thrive despite Controversies', *Market Realist* (June 2015), http://marketrealist.com/2015/06/energy-drinks-continue-thrive-despite-controversies/, accessed 28/01/16.

[155] Hewlett and Luce, 'Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek', https://hbr.org/2006/12/extreme-jobs-the-dangerous-allure-of-the-70-hour-workweek, accessed 28/01/16.

In this respect, extreme sports seem to be enthusiastically pursued by 'extreme workers' because it allows them to repeat the aspects of their job for which they receive the most praise and reinforcement: testing one's limits, taking voluntary sacrifices and risks, confronting high stakes and danger. Or perhaps, bungee jumping or sky diving is pursued, more basically, in order to perform and demonstrate (like Baudrillard's marathon runner), the suicide that they truly desire.

Viewed in this way, the *Stratos* jump acts as a metonym for a contemporary 'world picture'. Like Polke's grinning astronaut in the '60s, it figures our predicament accurately, without heroism or glow, but with a sort of gleeful, fatalistic energy. This illuminates, for instance, the idea that technological progress might complement, rather than oppose, a dysphoric worldview. This is encapsulated precisely in Red Bull's stunt. It is a display of extraordinary technological innovation put to vapid use, appealing to a population whose life is work and whose culture is impressed upon them by an energy drink. In this respect, suicidal experiments might be pursued for the same reason that Baudrillard observed of the New York marathon runner (the 'mania for an empty victory'). The sheer excess of the modern marathon was, for Baudrillard, a blatant overcompensation for something – an 'international symbol' of 'fetishistic performance'.[156] In the case of extreme sports, it might be argued that this overcompensation is symbolic of an extreme work culture of long hours, increased stress, anxiety, risk, and - returning to Virilio - an increasing sedentariness facilitated by the instantaneous reach of electronic communications. In extreme sports, the experience of extreme work continues after work as a form of hysteresis: like an afterimage that won't leave your vision. And so, quite depressingly, the pleasure one takes in extreme sports is ultimately synonymous with the pleasure one takes in 'extreme work'.

The theme of tragedy repeated as farce received a further twist in 2014, when Google's vice president Alan Eustace took a break from work in order to reenact Baumgartner's BASE jump from the stratosphere. In doing so he broke the freefall specialist's world altitude record. Eustace is not a dedicated athlete like Baumgartner: he is a middle-aged, computer scientist, with a classic business haircut and the sort of complexion one associates with a life spent behind a screen and under

[156] Baudrillard, *America*, 20.

fluorescent tube lighting (fig. 1.12). The impression is that Eustace's jump was, in effect, just another day at the office; however this time he wore 'a specially designed spacesuit…[and] jump[ed] from 130,000ft over the southern New Mexico desert, reaching a top speed of 822mph during a freefall that lasted four-and-a-half minutes'.[157] Red Bull's farce was therefore followed by another farce, rendering it even more banal and ridiculous. Eustace's jump was simply a more extreme version of the extreme sports enjoyed by extreme workers. I want to suggest we understand these as expressions of a Baudrillardian 'hyper-conformity' - a stupid, non-productive, or seductive (as in to divert or lead astray) version of work, in which you keep conforming to work protocols even though you are not at work. Hyper-conformity can be seen to function, similar to *Polke as Astronaut*, as a figure of stupidity: it seems to confuse and mock Red Bull's spectacular stunt, making it seem, to my mind, unimpressive and ordinary. However, an important difference between Eustace's jump and Polke's work is that Polke's intervention was an artistic commentary from an external position. Eustace's stupid jump, by contrast, came from within the selfsame system of extreme work and extreme sports. His was a form of enthusiastic participation in this culture, which inadvertently resulted in something stupid, mocking and parodic. Indeed it seems to affirm an idea of hyper-conformity as a 'paradoxical participation that does not justify but destroys'.[158]

This might be seen to represent a development of Heidegger's account of our age: for Heidegger technology allowed us to order and control the world, destroying our relationship with nature by compelling us to see it as a standing-reserve, something from which to extract and accumulate profit. Now, by contrast, under the sign of the Anthropocene, technology has facilitated a different relationship to the world and, by extension, a different 'world picture'. Whereas the world pictures of the '60s and '70s inspired a euphoric sense of global community, now our world pictures either symbolize our immobility, as in Google Earth, or induce a sense of

[157] See 'Google executive Alan Eustace jumps 130,000ft from edge of space', *The Guardian* (October 2014), https://www.theguardian.com/science/video/2014/oct/25/google-executive-alan-eustace-jumps-space-felix-baumgartner-record-video, accessed 03/02/16.

[158] This reference to hyper-conformity was made by Gary Genosko as part of a discussion of 'pataphysics' and its influence on Baudrillard's thought. See Gary Genosko, 'Pataphysics', in Richard G. Smith ed., *The Baudrillard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 151.

stupid individual competition as in *Stratos,* through feats of little consequence, which repeat the customs of an 'extreme work' culture. Our images of the Earth do not evoke the heroic achievements and conquests of modern science and our duty to protect the planet, as NASA's images did. Instead, they symbolize a planet whose use has, to a certain extent, been exhausted, or a planet to which we no longer have any 'useful' relationship. Whilst Google Earth retains the Heideggerian idea of grasping the world as an object, albeit skeuomorphically with its hand icon, it is Red Bull's *Stratos* that seems to play out the full implications of our contemporary 'world picture'. By this I mean to say that, with *Stratos*, we are made the object of technology: we see the world splitting open, we are the victims, acting out the fundamentally destructive drive of our dysphoric 'world picture'. This seems to signal a different relationship to technology: reversing perhaps (or at least blurring) the subject-object relationship, whereby we have become the object of technology as opposed to technology being the object of our intentions, as Heidegger theorised it. This does not, however, signal our arrival at an epistemological 'proper place', where, Adorno writes, 'the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their other…[a] state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other'.[159] Instead, it signals a subject-object relationship more like the one described in Vilém Flusser's writing on our 'post-industrial' age. Flusser argues that 'human beings are subjects to objects which stand in their way. They must change the objects. This changing of the objects becomes increasingly better understood theoretically and can be improved in practice, that is until human beings no longer need to confront objects [arguably indicating a completion of the Earth's Heideggerian 'enframing'] while advancing toward the future: then humans can be replaced by apparatus. From this point on, humans are no longer true subjects'.[160] In the suicidal stupidity of extreme sports there is, I think a kind of enthusiastic hyper-conformity to the object position claimed for us in our new 'world picture', in which we have no useful relationship to the Earth. And, as we have seen with Alan Eustace (an unexceptional man, just doing his job) this suicidal stupidity is inherent to our

[159] Adorno, 'On Subject and Object', 247.
[160] Vilém Flusser, 'The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs', *Leonardo*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1986), 330.

'world picture' - a seductive and pseudo-sacrificial reversal of its productive logic. For Adorno and Horkheimer (in their historical moment, discussing the rise of Nazism), it is at the height of enlightenment rationality that we are most vulnerable to stupidity – '[t]here is a historical tendency', they write, 'for cleverness to prove stupid'.[161] David Jenemann expands on this idea, suggesting that when the 'products of rationality are at their most refined, we are most liable to them tipping into mindlessness'.[162] This idea of there being a reversible aspect of technological advancement, when it is suddenly liable to regress or tip into absurdity, seems exemplified by Red Bull's *Stratos*, and then even more so, by Eustace's jump. Indeed, such instances of stupidity expressing itself within apparatuses of Control are not uncommon. For all intents and purposes, it seems to mark much of the visual culture and collective forms that have emerged on the internet, as I shall explore further now in Chapter Two.

[161] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 209.
[162] David Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', *Parallax*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), 44.

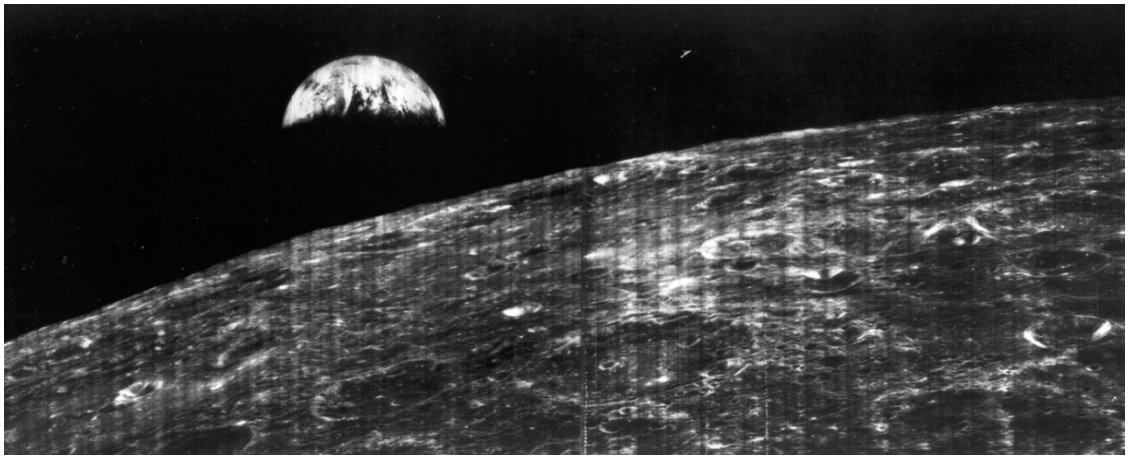

**Fig. 1.1** Lunar Orbiter 1, the first ever photograph of the Earth from the distance of the moon, 1966. Photo credit: NASA.

**Fig. 1.2** Apollo 8, *Earthrise*, 1968. Photo credit: NASA.

**Fig. 1.3** Apollo 17, *Blue Marble*, 1972. Photo credit: NASA.

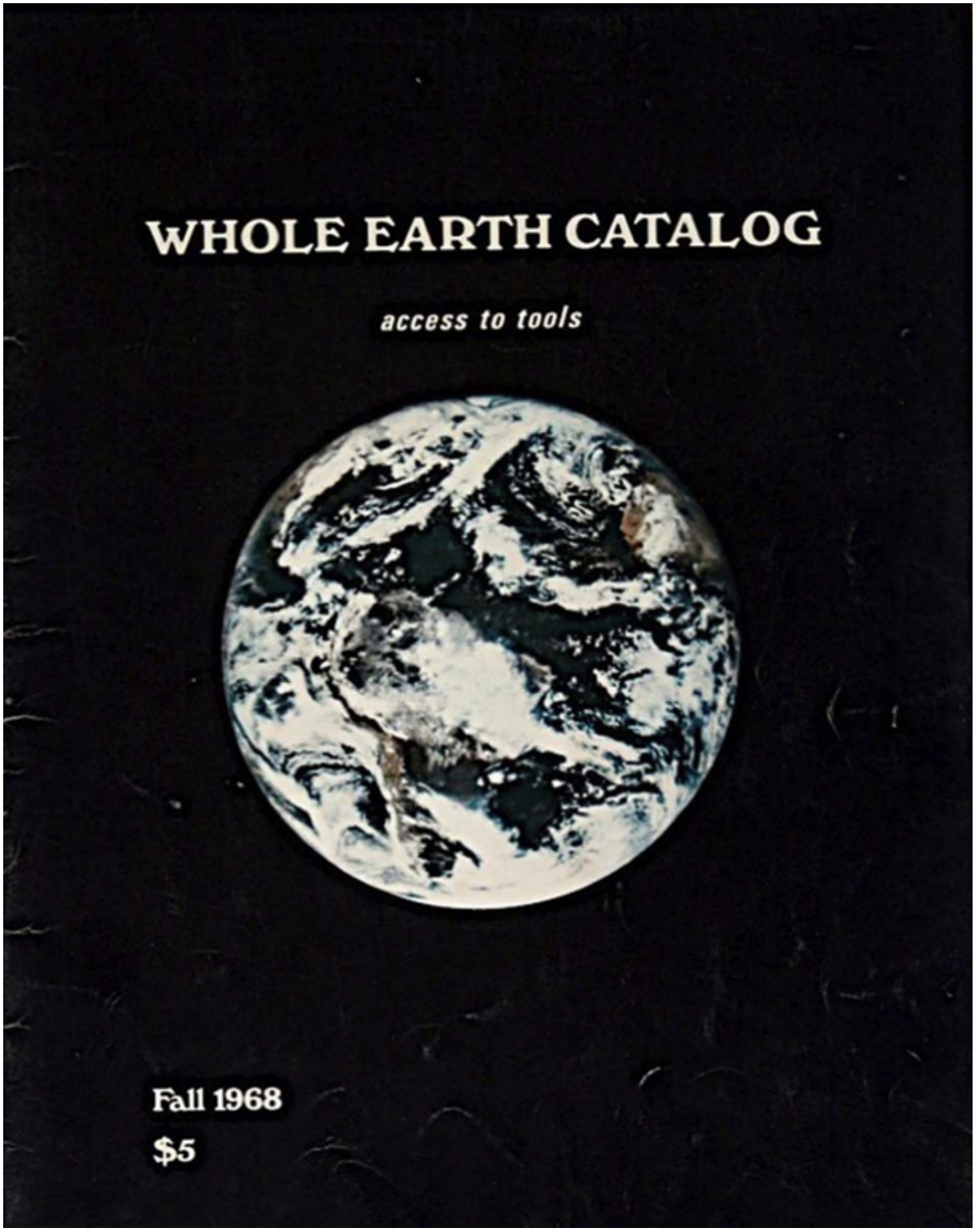


**Fig. 1.4** *Whole Earth Catalog*, Fall 1968. Photo credit: Whole Earth Catalog.


**Fig. 1.5** Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Kaffee Hag*, 1925. Gelatin silver print, 16.8 x 22.5 cm. Sprengel Museum Hannover.

**Fig. 1.6** Sigmar Polke, *Polke as Astronaut*, 1968. Dispersion paint on fabric, 90 x 25 cm. Private collection.

**Fig. 1.7** Sigmar Polke, *Polke as Astronaut,* 1968 (top right, in exhibition MOMA 2014). Photo taken by author 15/06/14.

**Fig. 1.8** Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893. Tempera and casein on cardboard, 91.3 x 73.7 cm. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo.

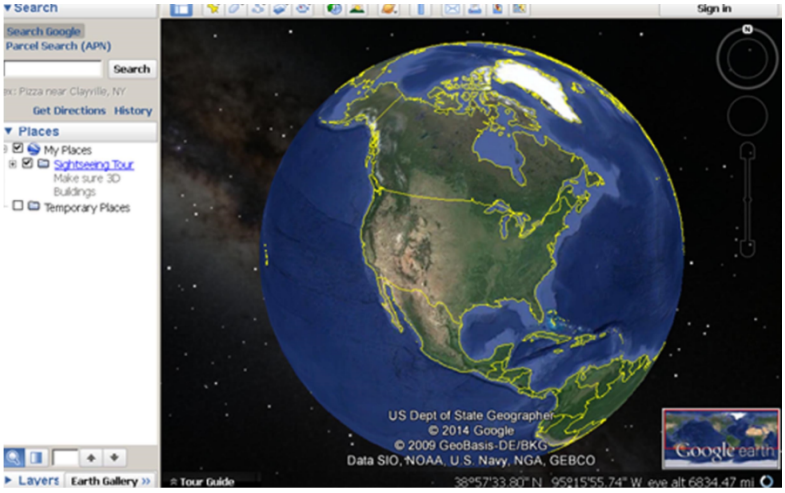


**Fig. 1.9** Google Earth, 2014. Screenshot taken by author 20/08/14.


**Fig. 1.10** Red Bull *Stratos*, 2012. Photo Credit: Red Bull.

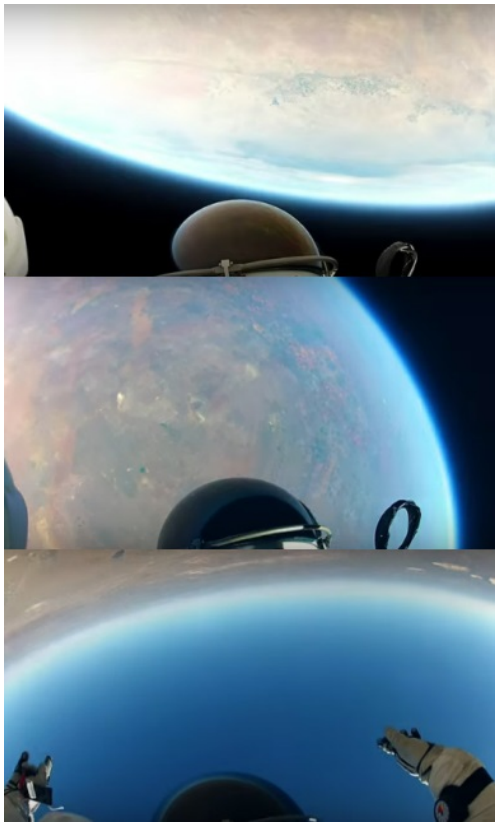

**Fig. 1.11** Red Bull, 'Red Bull Stratos - World Record Freefall', 2012. Video credit: Red Bull. Screenshots taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOoHArAzdug, accessed 15/05/14.

**Fig. 1.12** Alan Eustace, Senior Vice President of Engineering & Research at Google, during the second anniversary of Google Taiwan. Photo credit: Rico Shen.

## Chapter Two

### Super-Enthusiastically Working Together: Internet Memes and Free Time on 4chan

The template for one of the most popular images produced and circulated online (other than pornography) is a picture of a cat overlaid with some cute or funny text: lolcats. These images have come to be synonymous with online culture and epitomise one of the key ways that we interact online. The composite term lolcat ('lol' being an acronym for the phrase 'laugh out loud') refers to a type of internet meme comprising a photo of a cat with a large caption set in bold sans serif font: typically, the 'Impact' typeface is used. The lolcat that is normally credited with spawning this hugely popular cultural phenomenon is an anonymously authored picture of a grey cat with an open mouth fixed in an awkward smile and a glazed expression on its face (fig. 2.1). It appears to make a muddled request for a cheeseburger: *I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?* It was on the basis of his appreciation for this image that Eric Nakagawa set up icanhascheezburger.com in 2006 in order to act as a repository and forum to share similar images. Soon after the website went public, it began to receive 'around 200,000 unique visitors and a half-million page views each day'.[1] Moreover, 'Nakagawa says he receives up to 500 [new lolcat] submissions a day'.[2] These images however circulate within and beyond dedicated platforms like Nakagawa's. They are reported to have emerged in obscurity on the online image sharing board 4chan in 2005 and have since become a fixture of the popular cultural landscape: shared daily on social media and incorporated into various commercial advertisement campaigns.[3] Other notable lolcats include a black

[1] Aaron Rutkoff, 'With 'LOLcats' Internet Fad, Anyone Can Get In on the Joke', *The Wall Street Journa*l (August 2007), http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB118798557326508182, accessed 04/04/16.

[2] Rutkoff, 'With 'LOLcats' Internet Fad, Anyone Can Get In on the Joke', http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB118798557326508182, accessed 04/04/16.

[3] For instance, the cat in a series of lolcats affectionately known as 'grumpy cat', which became popular online in 2012, has become a bankable commercial brand. An article in *Adweek* details how grumpy cat became the official 'spokescat' for the American cat food brand *Friskies* and has an endorsement deal with *Cheerios* cereal. Grumpy cat has also starred in a *Lifetime* original movie on network television, titled *Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever.* This lolcat is now also a 'million-dollar cat'. See Emma Bazilian, 'Ad of the Day: Grumpy Cat Gets Stung by the Honey Nut Cheerios Mascot, Unimpressed by a famous face', *Adweek* (July 2014), http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/ad-day-grumpy-cat-gets-stung-honey-nut-cheerios-mascot-158694, accessed 14/04/16.

and white cat sitting behind a desk in a generic office, *I'm in ur office earnin ur salry* it explains (fig. 2.2), a small ginger cat dressed up in a fluffy chicken outfit as if in fancy dress, *I'M A CHIKIN LOL* (fig. 2.3), a big ginger cat sat on a laptop keyboard, *IF IT NOT FOR SITS*, it asks, *WHY IS IT MADE OF WARM?* (fig. 2.4). Indeed the ostensibly cute imagery of cats in unusual or ridiculous situations seems to produce an equivalently 'cute' response from us, as our language in the captions lapses into something similarly ridiculous or absurd.

The association of cute cats and cute captions can be traced back to the 1870s, with photographer Harry Pointer's anthropomorphic pictures of cats with twee annotations. The image shown in fig. 2.5 might be seen as the nineteenth century equivalent of *I CAN HAZ CHEEZBURGER?*. It shows a cat sat in a high chair like a baby, looking distressed, a caption set in capital letters and applied directly to the photograph asks *WHAT'S DELAYING MY DINNER?*. The appeal of anthropomorphic cats, it would seem, is firmly embedded in our culture. The aesthetic allure of these images seems to typify what Sianne Ngai calls 'the deverbalizing effect' that 'prototypically cute objects – babies, puppies, and so on – often have…on the subjects who impose cuteness upon them'.[4] Certainly, lolcats seem inherently infantile and infantilizing. We might go further to suggest that the popularity of internet memes in general is premised on their essential 'cuteness'. They are typically simple, small and insignificant objects online that are designed to be manipulated, customised and edited: images that rarely have one stable form but are always in flux. Ngai writes that 'it is crucial to cuteness that that its diminutive object has some sort of imposed-upon aspect or mien – that is, it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's feeling or attitude towards it'.[5] This fits the malleability of internet memes, which are shared and used by thousands or millions of people. Internet memes encompass a wide range of shared information online, including simple image macros (usually captioned photographic images like lolcats), YouTube videos that are shared and imitated, reaction gifs and ironic Amazon reviews; all of which are in a continuous process of circulation and '*de*-formation' as they are shared and posted

[4] Sianne Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 4 (Summer 2005), 827.
[5] Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', 816.

on social media, message boards, forums and more mainstream media outlets. All of these memes are cute. They don't withstand the subject's pressure, they have no value, it seems, other than their designed appeal to the viewer: their stupid cuteness.

Nonetheless, internet memes have in recent years become the focus of serious academic discussion, particularly in the field of media and communication studies. In December 2014 the *Journal of Visual Culture* published a themed issue on 'Internet Memes'.[6] In 2013 the MIT Press published Limor Shifman's *Meme's in Digital Culture* as part of their 'essential knowledge' series.[7] And various academics, such as Kate Miltner, Michelle Calka and Ryan Milner have been involved in research projects that interrogate the distinctive use of language and linguistic play embedded within this culture of image making.[8] Much of this literature celebrates these images for their participatory impulse and inherent playfulness: signaling the emergence of self-determining communities of users via a technology that we are often told fragments and separates individuals. However, I want to claim that these often positive arguments are premised upon a conceptualization of an active, co-operative or co-productive user that has been outmoded and functionalized by modern technology. The current dominant critical perspective recapitulates the kind of claims made for the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, albeit applied to mass popular culture. Such accounts belong to a tradition of finding empowerment from below, as with the sociological analyses of 'subcultures' in the 1970s and '80s that were particularly prominent in what was known as the Birmingham School for Cultural Studies.[9] However, I want to question whether the forms of collective agency represented in internet memes are empowering, whether the forms of sociability established on social media are emancipatory, whether the images

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[6] Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer eds., 'Internet Memes' [themed issue], *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 13, no.3 (December 2014).

[7] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2014).

[8] See, for instance, Kate Miltner, '"There's no place for lulz on LOLCats": The role of gender, genre and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an Internet meme', *First Monday*, vol. 19, no. 8 (August 2014), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5391/4103#author, accessed 15/05/15.
Ryan M. Milner, 'FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz', *The Fibreculture Journal*, Issue 22 (2013), 62 - 92. And Michelle Calka, 'I can has community? A case study and reflection on norms and social support in a lolcat fan group', ed. Laura W. Black, *Group communication: Cases for analysis, appreciation, and application* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 2010), 83–90.

[9] Here I'm thinking of, for instance, Dick Hebidge's research into punk, reggae, hipster and glam in his 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* [1979] (London; New York: Routledge, 1988).

themselves offer examples of subversive play and, in short, to examine precisely what sort of pleasure we take in them. These problems are explored in the belief that the internet meme, and the culture that it symbolizes, is important and that there is a definite disjuncture between the cute image and its critical reception in academic literature.

## memeslol

> We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'.[10]

Memes have long been an object of study in evolutionary biology. The term was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 as a general name for units of cultural transmission (such as fashion trends) that spread from person to person, or are propagated by imitation. They are usually distinguished from viruses, as in when something 'goes viral', because they are subject to change or mutation in the transmission process. As Susan Blackmore explains, memes produce unpredictable replications, like Chinese whispers: 'a friend tells you a story and you remember the gist and pass it on to someone else…[y]ou have not precisely imitated your friend's every action and word, but something (the gist of the story) has been copied from her to you and then on to someone else'.[11] The term is now predominately associated with the internet (a development that Dawkins has wholly embraced).[12] Here it refers to units of cultural information that are circulated, imitated and transformed online and that gradually scale up into a shared social phenomenon. They are, Limor

[10] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* [1976] (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.
[11] Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.
[12] I say this in reference to Dawkins's appearance in a film shown at the Saatchi and Saatchi's New Directors' Showcase 2013 that celebrated the term's appropriation by internet culture. Dawkins delivered a speech about the word's original intention and explained its hijacking by the internet. He argued that 'an internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random change and spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. There is no attempt at accuracy of copying, as with genes and as with memes in their original version. In the hijacked version, memes are deliberately altered, with the full knowledge of the person doing the changing'. Dawkins quoted in Olivia Solon, 'Richard Dawkins appears in psychedelic show celebrating internet memes', *Wired* (June 2013), http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2013-06/20/new-directors-showcase, accessed 04/06/15.

Shifman explains, 'highly compatible to the way culture is formed in the so-called era of Web 2.0, which is marked by application platforms for facilitating user-generated content'.[13]

I want to focus on image macros, one of the most widely shared memes, which also emerged on 4chan. They often appear in series and pair appropriated photograph and text, as we have already seen with the lolcat. It is a simple template that invites user participation. Indeed Clay Shirky writes that 'Lolcat images, dumb as they are, have internally consistent rules…captions should be spelled phonetically…[and] the lettering should use a sans-serif font'.[14] We can add to this set of rules, a clearly stunted syntax or nonstandard English dialect, which partly replicates the 'leet' (otherwise known as 1337) speak of online computer gaming/hacker culture.[15] The 'closest approximation', Michelle Calka writes 'would be to imagine English put through an automatic translator into another language and then translated back and spelled phonetically'.[16]

In some respects, the form of the image macro is prefigured in a canonical avant-garde work: Marcel Duchamp's captioned Mona Lisa appropriation, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) (fig. 2.6). This is because Duchamp's 'multi-layered pun' was a similarly straightforwardly replicable image; a postcard reproduction of the artistic 'masterpiece' plus scrawled facial hair with sexually objectifying caption.[17] It might

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[13] Limor Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, volume 18, iss. 3 (March 2013), 365.

[14] Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

[15] 'Leet' speak replaces some letters in words with numbers, icons or other letters that create a similar sound or appearance. This style of writing was originally used to bypass word-filtering and censorship on mail servers. More recently the method is mostly used to abbreviate words for faster typing. See '1337 speak', *Know your Meme*, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/1337-speak, accessed 04/06/15.

[16] Michelle Calka quoted in Lauren Gawne and Jill Vaughan, 'I can haz language play: The construction of language and identity in LOLspeak', *Proceedings of the 42nd Australian Linguistic Society Conference – 2011*, eds. Maïa Ponsonnet, Loan Dao and Margit Bowle, https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/9404/8/AustLinguisticSocConf42_2012.pdf, accessed 15/05/15.

[17] Donald Kuspit writes of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q* as a 'multi-layered pun' that 'de-idealizes a woman into a sex object in the act of vandalizing a world famous masterpiece. On its phonetic caption, he explains, 'the letters become words which become a devaluing male comment on the beautiful, dignified woman – she's just another slut. She's smiling because she's thinking of being fucked – more probably of masturbating, that is, fucking herself'. Certainly in this understanding, Duchamp's manipulation of the Mona Lisa significantly altered its normal reception. See Donald Kuspit, 'A Critical History of 20th Century Art, Chapter 2, Part 3 Spiritualism and Nihilism: The Second

seem an irreverent comparison, which perhaps dumbs down Duchamp, but surely this is exactly in the artist's spirit: recapturing his own dumbness, disposability and fascination with mass media distribution. Furthermore, it can be argued that *L.H.O.O.Q.* was a meme in its own time. Francis Picabia, in 1920, manufactured a second *L.H.O.O.Q.* for the March 1920 cover of his magazine *391*. As if in anticipation of the meme's tendency to spread via mutation, Picabia mistitled the image as *Tableau Dada* and omitted the goatee, adding only a moustache. This then prompted Duchamp to return to the image, providing further changes.[18]

With the image macro we can identify a large-scale return to this avant-garde form of image production, technology now having caught up with and claimed dominion over Duchamp's avant-garde concept. The image is, in Shifman's words, 'hyper-significant'.[19] This is to say that image macros reveal their processes of signification. 'They are', Shifman explains, 'more about the process of meaning-making than about meaning itself'.[20] For this reason image macros, like Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.,* emphasize simplicity, interchangeable elements and ease of replication. They have a fixed form, an image that is superimposed with capitalized and bold font, and usually use the same 'Impact' typeface. This is not an accidental choice: Impact imposes a particular form of user engagement, its regularity means small amounts of text can be read instantaneously.[21] While they can seem ill-considered,

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Decade', *Artnet Magazine*, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit3-17-06.asp, accessed 18/05/15.

[18] Arturo Schwartz records this meme-like process of transmission in *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*. He writes: 'Francis Picabia published a "reproduction" of *L.H.O.O.Q*. on page one of the March 1920 issue of his journal *391*. Although headed "Tableau Dada by Marcel Duchamp," it was actually by Picabia himself. Earlier, Picabia had asked Duchamp to send him L.H.O.O.Q. so that he could reproduce it in his "Manifeste Dada" issue. According to Duchamp: "My original did not arrive in time and in order not to delay further the printing of *391*, Picabia himself drew the mustache on the Mona Lisa but forgot the beard." Some time later, Hans Arp came upon this issue of *391* while browsing in a bookstore. He called the omission to Duchamp's attention, whereupon Duchamp drew in the missing beard and added an inscription at the bottom: *Moustaches par Picabia, barbe par Marcel Duchamp*'. See Arturo Schwartz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 671.

[19] Shifman, 'The Cultural Logic of Photo-based Memes', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 13, no. 3 (December 2014), 341.

[20] Shifman, 'The Cultural Logic of Photo-based Memes', 344.

[21] The font was first designed in 1965 by Geoffrey Lee for a foundry in Sheffield. In an essay on the cultural history of 'Impact', Kate Brideau and Charles Berret write about the effect of Lee's peculiarly rectangular design. 'Impact and other similar typefaces are not useful for large selections of text', they write, '[w]e can read Impact perfectly well, but we are unlikely to want to read even a paragraph of text in this face. This is a typeface designed for small amounts of text, brief ideas, headlines, fragments, and perhaps even punchlines'. They also explain that Impact's white type with

amateurish or crude in their appearance (again like Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*), these aspects of the meme's construction highlight its processual nature; the fact that it is never a finished article. They are the features of the image that make it available for replication or imitation. Indeed memes have been critically praised for their enabling of collaborative relationships. This is because they function in an economy that forms and perpetuates a supposedly non-hierarchical community of peers, as images are exchanged back and forth, with each repetition producing variation or difference. For instance, Lauren Gawne and Jill Vaughan consider the language play that takes place in this exchange economy (particularly with lolcats) and discuss its contribution to online 'identity construction and in-group cohesion'.[22] And, similarly, Kate Miltner reasons that the lolcats' nonstandard English internet dialect functions as a way of constructing and maintaining social boundaries. For Miltner, memes are 'changing the way people engage in cultural participation, creative engagement, community interaction, and identity construction'.[23] For instance, Miltner introduces the example of 'in-jokes', which often help to institute symbolic boundaries around a mass of people, in order to clarify how memes might fulfil this role.[24] And in her book *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014), Shifman argues outright that meme images

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black contour will appear legible over any colour combinations, meaning that 'there is no need…to be concerned with the [font's] integration…into your image'. Thus it suits the meme's interchangeability. Brideau and Berret explain that the 'extreme regularity of this typeface lends itself well to the automated generation of internet memes…[and furthermore that] this bold condensed sans serif typeface, white with a black contour, may be the most successful meme among image macros'. Reflecting the meme's origin in Dawkin's evolutionary biology, they suggest that we might think that the 'image macro…is in the end merely a means for Impact to copy itself'. See Kate Brideau and Charles Berret, 'A Brief Introduction to Impact: 'The Meme Font'', *The Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 13, no.3 (December 2014), 310 – 312.

[22] Gawne and Vaughan, 'I can haz language play: The construction of language and identity in LOLspeak', https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/9404/8/AustLinguisticSocConf42_2012.pdf, accessed 15/05/15.

[23] Kate Miltner, '"There's no place for lulz on LOLCats": The role of gender, genre and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an Internet meme', *First Monday*, vol. 19, no. 8 (August 2014), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5391/4103#author, accessed 15/05/15.

[24] 'The notion of the in–joke', Miltner writes, describing her own research experiment that studied communities of lolcat enthusiasts, 'was raised repeatedly throughout the groups. The MemeGeeks [one of the test groups] especially prized LOLCats for the fact that they were "a bit of an insidery club, which is cool"… Similarly, MemeGeek JE explained that "the funniest thing is being part of the group that understands the joke. Having to explain it to my boyfriend always makes it sound really rubbish". In this respect, the notion of the in-joke helps to construct a sense of community amongst online users. See Miltner, '"There's no place for lulz on LOLCats": The role of gender, genre and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an Internet meme', http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5391/4103#author, accessed 15/05/15.

'spread the notion of participatory culture itself'.[25]

Through this process of peer-to-peer collaboration, memes are increasingly considered to be an exemplary means by which communities are built and consolidated amongst dispersed networked individuals, in a way that is self-determining and thus partly independent of the controlling infrastructures of normal social media platforms, such as, for instance, Facebook, which track, surveil and regulate behavior. This is seen, by some, to be apparent in their aesthetic form. For Patrick Davison the rushed and protean appearance of memes, often put together on anachronistic programs such as MS Paint, functions as 'a counterfactual to the dominant ideology of technological progress'.[26] Similarly Nick Douglas finds a humanistic element in the meme's inherent sloppiness: a pointed reminder of human messiness and a continued propensity for inaccuracies and failings to emerge in the interface between humans and highly advanced systems. We might also see the meme's casual disregard for technological standards as evidence of the increased availability, for non-professional use, of expensive photo editing software in the form of pirated free downloads. It is as if the meme incarnates a spirit of joyful amateurism that is at odds with, and resists, the perfectibility associated with technological advancement. Further to this, memes have been singled out as an important and surreptitious vehicle for political speech, particularly in regimes where the expression of oppositional sentiment is brutally quashed. A popular example of this is the mythical *Grass Mud Horse*, a Chinese internet meme resembling an alpaca, widely used on chat forums in China as a form of symbolic defiance against Internet censorship. Again, like Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.,* its name has a double meaning: in Mandarin the name *Grass Mud Horse* also reads as 'Fuck your mother'.[27]

[25] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 2014), 89.

[26] Patrick Davison, 'Because of the Pixels: On the History, Form, and Influence of MS Paint', *The Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 13, no.3 (December 2014), 292.

[27] An article in *The New York Times* writes that while '"grass-mud horse" sounds like a nasty curse in Chinese, its written Chinese characters are completely different, and its meaning —taken literally — is benign. Thus the beast not only has dodged censors' computers, but has also eluded the government's own ban on so-called offensive behaviour'. Quoting Xiao Qiang (a professor of journalism), the article explains the memetic spread of the symbol as follows: 'the grass-mud horse "has become an icon of resistance to censorship…The expression and cartoon videos may seem like a juvenile response to an unreasonable rule...But the fact that the vast online population has joined the

Against this, however, I want to argue that internet memes can be considered agents of cultural reproduction, meaning that they reproduce the logic of our existing society rather than rising against or opposing it. Indeed we might think that these images have the capacity to silence expression as much as they enable it, by globally disseminating and reinforcing a specifically coded form of subjectivity. In this spirit, Ryan Milner points out that memes are often 'premised on xenophobic essentialisms of a homogenized outgroup' and tend to reinforce 'oppressive ideologies'.[28] The implication is that the online communities that produce these images assume a white, masculine and western identity-type as normal and standard. From this perspective, the typically 'anonymous' author nevertheless becomes a gendered and racially coded subject. Thus we might suggest that this culture works, partly, to repress, rather than liberate difference. Furthermore, Shifman, writing with Hadyn Levy and Mike Thelwall, has commented on the cultural bias in memes, arguing that they have a function as 'powerful agents of globalization and Americanization'.[29] Building on these more critical perspectives, I want to argue that memes are tied to, and revealing of, contemporary forms of labour: a culture of participatory activity that provides little to no gain for its participants.

The cult of participation and concept of the viewer or user as active, co-operative and co-productive - which seems to be inherited in such accounts - can be seen to go back to the avant-garde rhetoric of the 1920s and 1930s. In this sense, we can suggest that the current framework for critical validation tends to repeat the heroic language of critical positions that arose within industrial culture – particularly, for example, that of Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. For Benjamin (here writing about Brecht's 'epic theatre'); a successful work hinged on an understanding of participation that redeemed the work from an increasing aestheticization of life and politics in the 1930s. In his essay 'The Author as Producer' (1937) he argues that 'the author's production must have the character of a model: it must be able to

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chorus, from serious scholars to usually politically apathetic urban white-collar workers, shows how strongly this expression resonates."' See Michael Wines, 'A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors', *The New York Times* (March 2009), http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html, accessed 18/05/15.

[28] Ryan M. Milner, 'FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz', *The Fibreculture Journal*, iss. 22 (2013), 72.

[29] Shifman, Haydn Levy and Mike Thelwall, 'Internet Jokes: The Secret Agents of Globalization?', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* vol. 19, iss. 4 (2014), 739.

instruct other writers in their production and, secondly, it must be able to place an improved apparatus at their disposal. This apparatus will be the better, the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process – in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators'.[30] The point of this is that it shakes the audience out of a passive sort of consumption. Indeed Benjamin argued that Brecht 'compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part'.[31] And Brecht himself stresses the importance of making literature and theatre 'intellectually available to the broad masses'.[32] This was vital for both in a cultural moment inflected with a New Objectivity style, which as we saw in Chapter One, was criticized for transforming objects into articles of passive consumption: in the process distancing the consumer from the production process. While some present-day writers maintain this language of avant-garde valorization when describing memes (regarding the significance of the participant in critical practice), I want to claim that it has become outmoded in a specific way: historical reality having absorbed and swallowed the model by turning it into a productive commercial reality. Specifically, Brecht's idealism is outmoded by the reality of the 'prosumer': a user of new media who consumes and produces content at the same time. This is the user who, as if stuck in a never-ending circle, evokes the ancient 'ouroboros' symbol, giving new meaning to its image of a snake devouring its own tail. The meme is symptomatic of this culture of active consumption: it mediates collaborative relationships amongst users who consume the image and are prompted to produce an alternative version, in order to consolidate their place in the group. It follows that the apparatus - here, the Internet - in which memes are made and shared and remade, functions in an economic paradigm that is sustained by the actions of its consumers, or prosumers, who are not allowed to be passive.

Lisa Nakamura points out that collaboratively produced '[m]emes are the grist that allows these [new media economy] mills to grind; yet somehow the political economic critique of the social networking industries seems not to have tainted

[30] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' [1934], *Understanding Brecht*, tr. Anna Bostock (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 98.
[31] Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', 100.
[32] Bertolt Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukács', in Theodor Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 85.

them'.[33] This is because, Nakamura explains, 'they invoke pleasure and fun', and so 'float free of the networks that they fuel'.[34] The whimsy of captioned images of cats, in this account, works to conceal the true nature of participation in social networking industries. Moreover, in an article about the short-lived 'ROFLCon' (a biennial convention and conference dedicated to memes and internet culture that ran from 2008 to 2012 at MIT), Laura June suggests that the event's indefinite hiatus might be due to a realization amongst its organizers that the meme, and the online culture surrounding memes, have become indissociable from commercial culture, and perhaps offer very little in excess:

> The problem is that internet celebrities and memes are now making up a greater part of our "culture" than ever — and for some of us, they are almost the entirety of it. We consume them: we watch their videos millions of times, we caption their images freely and exuberantly… Many of the attendees whom I spoke to, once I talked to them long enough, mentioned that they weren't really better off financially than they had been before creating whatever they created, or becoming a meme, or finding their little corner of celebrity… The attendees at ROFLCon all agree, these people are treasures to a certain segment of the population. But increasingly, they are also a nearly endless fount of money-making possibilities, coming at little to no cost, with little to no gain for their subjects and creators.[35]

The cute captioned images of cats, in this understanding, function to conceal the true nature of online participation. Regardless of how fun, stupid or insignificant it might seem, it is a form of value generation that offers little to no gain for its creators. In this respect memes are emblematic of what Tiziana Terranova calls the 'valorisation of free (user) labor' in the new economy:

> …which is to say unpaid and undirected labor, but which is nonetheless controlled… in exchange for their participation, the user-collaborators receive some type of more or less immaterial return (being part of a community or social

[33] Lisa Nakamura, 'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media', *The Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 13, no. 3 (December 2014), 269.
[34] Lisa Nakamura, 'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media', 269.
[35] Laura June, At ROFLCon, watching memes go mainstream', *The Verge* (May 2012), http://www.theverge.com/2012/5/7/3005044/roflcon-when-memes-go-mainstream, accessed 15/03/15.

network; or, much more materially, having access to credit and various free products)[36]

The extent of our involuntary participation and embeddedness within this new economy and its 24/7, constantly active, temporality has recently become much clearer. A 2015 study by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research found that over 20% of secondary school children wake at night in order to check or post on social media.[37] The dynamic flow of online media interrupts their circadian rhythms, compelling their participation even while they are unconscious.[38] This, perhaps, realises Slavoj Žižek's remarks on the 'real threat' of new media: namely, that it 'deprive[s] us of our passivity, of our authentic passive experience [such as sleep], and thus prepare[s] us for mindless frenetic activity - for endless work'.[39]

In sharp contrast to this account of online participation the economist Jeremy Rifkin has hypothesised a global economic shift away from capitalism with these new participatory technological infrastructures. From this point of view we are heading towards a new 'collaborative commons' economic paradigm. For Rifkin, this has the potential to free human beings from pecuniary interests. He writes that

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[36] Tiziana Terranova, 'New Economy, Financialization and Social Production in the Web 2.0', in Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra eds, *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 156.

[37] This study was detailed in an article by Sally Weale in *The Guardian*, which links the nocturnal phenomenon to increased rates of depression and fatigue amongst school children. Weale summarises the research experiment, explaining that it 'surveyed more than 400 pupils in year 8 (aged 12 and 13) and 400 in year 10 (aged 14 and 15) to find out about their bedtime and sleeping patterns. Asked how often they wake at night to use social media, 22% of year 8 pupils, and 23% of year 10s, said "almost always". A further 14% of the younger group and 15% of the older said they did so at least once a week'. See Sally Weale, 'Fifth of secondary school pupils "wake almost every night to use social media"', *The Guardian*, September 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/sep/15/fifth-of-secondary-school-pupils-wake-almost-every-night-to-use-social-media, accessed 15/09/15.

[38] This would seem to indicate a deepening of Jonathan Crary's influential discussion of late capitalism's 24/7 temporality and the contemporary condition of sleep. Crary writes that: 'In its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity, with the incalculable losses it causes in production time, circulation, and consumption, sleep will always collide with the demands of a 24h universe. The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep, freed from a morass of simulated needs, subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism. Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism. Most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life - hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship - have been remade into commodified or financialized forms. Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be 24/7 colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability, and thus remains an incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present'. It would seem, following this study, that sleep is increasingly being harnessed as productive time by the constant flow of social media. See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 10-11.

[39] Slavoj Žižek, 'Will You Laugh for Me, Please?', *In These Times* (July 2003), http://inthesetimes.com/article/88/will_you_laugh_for_me_please, accessed 31/08/15.

contemporary economists are currently preoccupied by the 'contradictory workings of the capitalist system, unsure of how to make the market economy function without self-destructing in the wake of new technologies that are speeding society into a near zero marginal cost era'.[40] Rifkin suggests that our contemporary technological moment reactivates and arguably realises the themes of an essay by economist John Maynard Keynes, titled 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren' (1930). Keynes believed, Rifkin writes:

> that "a point may soon be reached, much sooner perhaps than we are all of us aware of, when these [economic] needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes." He looked expectantly to a future in which machines would produce an abundance of nearly free goods and services, liberating the human race from toil and hardships and freeing the human mind from a preoccupation with strictly pecuniary interests to focus more on the "arts for life" and the quest for transcendence.[41]

Memes might seem an epitome of this kind of paradigm, which is predicated on free sharing and peer cooperation. However, following Terranova, we might think, by contrast, that the collaborative production and consumption of free products, like memes, equally works to construct an unfree individual. If we think about memes like this, then it is possible to compare their culture of participation and collaborative working to the shockworkers of Soviet Russia. It seems that, in this respect, already in the 1930s, these ideals of collaboration were being outmoded by historical reality.

The shockworkers were famously super-productive and super-enthusiastic workers who followed the lead of mineworker Aleksey Stakhanov. In 1935 Stakhanov was reported to have mined 102 tons of coal instead of a planned seven tons, in less than six hours.[42] He was rewarded by the state as a model worker, and his image and exploits were promoted in the press, literature and film as an act of heroism; he even appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in December 1935 (fig. 2.7). Hito Steyerl, in an essay employing the symbolism of the shockworkers to describe unpaid labour in the art world, suggests that the shockworkers' 'super-

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[40] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, The Collaborative Commons, and The Eclipse of Capitalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 12.
[41] Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, The Collaborative Commons, and The Eclipse of Capitalism,* 11.
[42] Olga Pigareva, 'Of Russian origin: *Udarnik*', *RT Russiapedia,* http://russiapedia.rt.com/of-russian-origin/udarnik/, accessed 20/03/15

productive contribution to socialist construction was supposedly voluntary, heroic, based on enthusiasm and affect, but overseen by a growing security apparatus'.[43] Whilst their engagement was genuine and their enthusiasm sincere, these super-productive workers apparently remained blind to a harsh reality of intensifying exploitation. Now, 'Stakhanovite' has turned into a derogatory term for people who are overachievers in their jobs, or more simply put, workaholics.[44] This analogy, between the shockworker and the prosumer, can be summed up by the comparison proposed in fig. 2.7 and 2.8. Here we have a pair of *Time* magazine cover images: Aleksey Stakhanov in 1935 and 2006's Person of the Year – 'You. Yes you'. This comparison suggests that we have become the super-productive, enthusiastic collaborators with the existing economic regime.

The internet, in this understanding, can be defined as an apparatus. It operates as an instrument of Control, facilitating an adoption of social norms and values that maintain and reproduce its conditions of production. For instance, various commentators have argued that the internet has generated a new form of subjectivity: as we shall see, Giorgio Agamben labels us all 'desubjects' and Deleuze writes of individuals as 'dividuals', which simply refers to, as Seb Franklin glosses, 'the subject digitized'.[45] In this respect, the internet, I will argue, has produced a new concept of the 'public' that we automatically conform to, and a new sense of the 'public sphere' that must be dealt with if we are to properly interrogate emerging forms of online social and cultural practice.

## ideological post-state apparatus

A common way of attacking the perceived lack of autonomy and passivity in the general public has been to say that they, or we, are like sheep. This accusation suggests that all of our decisions are in some way marked or informed by a dominant societal norm, to which we indifferently conform. In today's world, we might

[43] Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', in Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle eds., *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 95.

[44] See 'Prominent Russians: Aleksey Stakhanov', *RT Russiapedia,* http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/history-and-mythology/aleksey-stakhanov/, accessed 20/03/15.

[45] Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2015), Kindle Edition.

propose, by contrast, that we are more like ants. This description would also refer to our perceived lack of autonomy. However, responding to recent economic shifts and technological trends, the ant's super-activity (in contrast to the sheep's passive consumption) comes to the fore as perhaps the most lucid zoomorphic symbol of our relationship to dominant social and economic norms. Indeed, the harnessing and controlling of our attention in and by networked technologies, for the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, 'leads to a becoming-arthropod (anthill)'.[46] In this anthill-like apparatus 'the consumer becomes the producer of the network *where he* consumes and *which* consumes *him* (which consumes and exhausts his desire)'.[47] And because we reside in this anthill, we become more and more like ants. Stiegler provocatively claims, moreover, that technological devices surround us like skeletal prostheses, covering our muscles in a way that resembles the segmented body and jointed appendages of the ant's exoskeleton. He uses the image of the 'car where the consumer resembles a ridiculous hermit crab in its shell' to make this analogy clear.[48] Building on Stiegler's attention to the way in which machines impact upon the body and its behaviour, I want to propose a theorization of the internet as a technology that produces the conditions for our subjectivity.

The idea of a society of ants produced or constituted as such by the dominant technological system can be fruitfully compared to Søren Kierkegaard's conception of the 'public' in his essay 'The Present Age', published in 1846. Kierkegaard's essay is an early example of a critical response to mass distribution technologies. For Kierkegaard the 'public' was something created by the printing press. This apparatus, on his account, served to destroy social and cultural difference, in order to enable the smooth and frictionless dissemination and reception of standardized printed materials, such as newspapers. Kierkegaard's 'public' was a side-effect of the technology: an abstract concept that nevertheless produced normative roles to which people would adhere, or else they would – to quote Kierkegaard - 'sink'.[49] He writes: 'In order that everything should be reduced to the same level, it is first of all

[46] Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch,* tr. Barnaby Norman (Malden, MA; Cambridge: Wiley, 2014), 64.
[47] Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch,* 64.
[48] Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch,* 64.
[49] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises* [1840], tr. Alexander Dru and Walter Lowrie (London; New York; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1940), 43.

necessary to procure a phantom… a monstrous abstraction, an all-embracing something which is nothing, a mirage - and that phantom is *the public'*.[50]

The internet, I propose, must be thought in similar terms: a machine, or apparatus, which to a certain extent, brings everything to the same level and mediates what we know as the 'public'. In this respect it is alien to the commonly accepted idea of a liberal 'public sphere', based upon the eighteenth century bourgeois blueprint: the European coffee houses, *salons* and table societies where, Jürgen Habermas explains, 'a social intercourse' was supposedly preserved that disregarded status, rank, power, prestige, hierarchy, economic dependencies and the laws of the market.[51] Instead, this phantom 'public' I think can be interpreted in relation to Louis Althusser's analysis of Ideological State Apparatuses in his pivotal essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970), albeit with an important difference to which I will return. In this essay, Althusser described the ways in which capital reproduces its conditions of production. He distinguishes between two apparatuses: the State Apparatus (which is repressive and operates through violence) and the Ideological State Apparatus (which encompasses churches, schools, legal systems and various cultural forms). It is the Ideological State Apparatus which is of most interest here. This apparatus is involved in the process of turning individuals into subjects who reproduce the relations of production and are harnessed as productive force, or labourers. Regarding this process, Althusser writes that the 'individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject [we can relate this capitalized Subject to Kierkegaard's phantom 'public'], i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection "all by himself"'.[52] Althusser's account of the Ideological State Apparatuses and their role in the reproduction of the conditions of production has influenced many prominent analyses of film and the workings of cinema in the late twentieth

[50] Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises,* 37.
[51] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962], tr. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 36.
[52] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', *Essays on Ideology* [1976], tr. B. Brewster and G. Lock (London; New York: Verso, 1984), 56.

century.[53] Moreover we can identify its import in some critical writing about more contemporary technologies. For instance, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker argue that an Althusserian interpellation of the individual is, inadvertently, implicated in console gaming. In their co-authored book *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (2007), they suggest (in terms reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's comments on film as a sort of training ground in 'The Work of Art in the age of its Technological Reproducibility' essay; albeit in a dystopian reversal of Benjamin's more utopian spirit) that 'games from *State of Emergency* to *Dope Wars* are training tools for life inside the protological network, where flexibility, systemic problem solving, quick reflexes, and indeed play itself are as highly valued and commodified as sitting still and hushing up were for the disciplinary societies of modernity'.[54] Furthermore, Giorgio Agamben has claimed that a defining truth of our technological moment is 'the massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses'.[55] For instance, he describes his 'implacable hatred' for the mobile phone, because as well as making 'the relationship between people all the more abstract', he writes, the individual 'captured by the "cellular telephone" apparatus - whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him - cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled'.[56] For Agamben, this electronically

[53] For instance, in the 1970s Jean-Louis Baudry and Laura Mulvey coupled Althusser's model with Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage of the infant's development in order to understand the workings of the cinematic apparatus and its form of subjection. In his essay 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (1974), Baudry discusses the main filmic instruments (camera, projection and theatre) and shows how they ultimately reproduce Lacan's mirror stage in which the child sees itself for the first time in a mirror, leading to a secondary identification. This refers to the constitution of the subject, as a result of identification with the specular and whole image. For instance, the 'camera', Baudry explains, reproduces the effect of Renaissance perspective and thus creates 'a total vision which corresponds to the idealist conception of the fullness and homogeneity of being'. And the darkened space of the 'theatre' chains, captures and captivates the audience. The arrangement of these elements 'reconstruct[s] the situation necessary to the release of the mirror stage and the subject is thereby constituted according to the dominant ideology'. Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) focuses on Hollywood and the tendency of its cinematic apparatus to produce an 'image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of men'. This creates a scopophilic mode of viewing, which reproduces the inequalities and oppressions of patriarchal capitalist society. See Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Film Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 2 (Winter 1974 – 1975), 39 – 47. And Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' [1975], in Philip Rosen ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 198-209.

[54] Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 115.

[55] Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays,* tr. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 15.

[56] Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 21.

interpellated individual is harmless as a political subject: this is because 'his everyday gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires…[are] commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by apparatuses'.[57]

However, *State of Emergency*, *Dope Wars*, other computer games and mobile phones cannot be directly interpreted as Ideological State Apparatuses. Whilst they facilitate the maintenance of a particular capitalist mode of production (clearly illustrated by Galloway and Thacker as a form of training for fully-functional life in post-disciplinary capitalism), they are not necessarily implicated in a general form of state power. Instead they are proprietary devices owned by corporations. Thus, I want to propose we might call them Ideological *post*-State Apparatuses. This is to acknowledge a shift in power, which is increasingly becoming a part of the popular cultural consciousness. In 2010 Brad Burnham (a managing partner of a New York based venture capital film) made a provocative blog entry that illuminates the relocation of power away from state interests. He focuses on the relationship between web service providers on the internet and web service users. Burnham claims that these platforms – he cites, for example, Google, Twitter, Facebook – must be considered a form of government and that, therefore, their users must be considered citizens. In reference to the web service providers' strict parameters for content production and user communication, and their sophisticated models for capital accumulation, he argues that these new 'governments' are not democratic, but 'oligarchic'.[58] This echoes and, in part, fulfils the science and technology journalist Richard L. Brandt's fervent remark from 1998 that he expected 'to see the overthrow of the U.S government in…[his] lifetime'.[59] The software Microsoft provided for the World Wide Web, he believed 'will gradually make the U.S. government obsolete'.[60]

And yet, we might see the idea of Ideological post-State Apparatuses as going even further back. In Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they describe a new formation of power that pre-empts Deleuze's later essay 'Postscript

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[57] Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 23.
[58] Brad Burnham, 'Web Services as Governments', *Union Square Ventures* (June 2010), http://www.usv.com/2010/06/web-services-as-governments.php, accessed 02/02/13.
[59] Richard L. Brandt quoted in Tom Wolfe, 'Foreword', *Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews*, eds. Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2005), x.
[60] Brandt quoted in Wolfe, 'Foreword', x.

on Control Societies' (1990). Here they write of a networked system that transcends state borders and regulatory control. 'Today', Deleuze and Guattari write, 'we can depict an enormous, so-called stateless, monetary mass that circulates through foreign exchange and across borders, eluding control by the States, forming a multinational ecumenical organization, constituting a de facto supranational power untouched by governmental decisions'.[61] This monstrous image was also already anticipated in pop cultural forms; it is most vividly expressed in a famous scene from Sidney Lumet's 1976 motion picture, *Network*. Here Arthur Jensen, the chairman of the Communications Corporation of America, gives the meddling TV personality Howard Beale a lesson in the workings of a post-state networked capital.

> You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples! There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion… The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business…[62]

In line with these insights, it is possible to identify the internet as the *de facto* Ideological post-State Apparatus, which reproduces the conditions of production for the present age (where global corporate service providers are increasingly operating as the locus of power and subject production). Like Kierkegaard's printing press, this technology needs to destroy social and cultural difference in order to enable its smooth and frictionless dissemination of information: indeed Agamben touches upon this, arguing that the new apparatuses are instigating an 'eclipse of politics'.[63] The process of subjection, Agamben suggests, is threatened by these apparatuses: because they operate by 'desubjectification'.[64] By this account, the kind of subjectivity that we acquire through our acquiescence to Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses is diminished – this subjectivity now having been shrunk to a number by which one can be contacted. The interpellated subject in Althusser is exploded, as is the attendant formation of a collective subject from which to form a counter-politics. Whilst Agamben notes that earlier historic periods produced 'real [or collective]

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[61] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 435.
[62] Transcribed from *Network*, Directed by Sidney Lumet [film], (Los Angeles, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1976).
[63] Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 22.
[64] Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 20.

identities' such as the workers' movement and the bourgeoisie, the desubjectification by new post-state apparatuses tends to atomize and disperse individuals. In this respect, Agamben writes that the new apparatuses have produced the 'most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history'.[65] This is the 'public' enabled by contemporary machines, and the 'public' that is required to reproduce contemporary capital's conditions of production: that is to say, some have argued, a concept of the 'public' in which we are not subjects but 'desubjects'.

The processes of interpellation by the new apparatuses, I think, are made clear by Facebook and its variety of social games, which are often criticized for instrumentalizing user behavior and content production. Indeed, we might suggest that these apparatuses promote a type of 'machinic enslavement', in which the subject is defined purely by the actions that use of the machine demands.[66] In Habermas's theory of the 'public sphere', the idea of critical discourse figures strongly: he writes of an 'autonomy that turns conversation into criticism and *bons mots* into arguments'.[67] However, this idea of critical, parodic or even subversive discourse is to a certain extent disavowed in the 'public sphere' defined by our current technological apparatuses, such as on Facebook. This aspect of internet services is exposed in the game designer and cultural critic Ian Bogost's Facebook-based social game platform *Cow Clicker*, which involuntarily revealed that when online, even directly critical or subversive cultural forms are coopted by the technology, which swallows up all 'intention' according to the homogeneity of its function. The game was released in July 2010, initially for a seminar on social gaming at New York University. It was made in order to reveal and make apparent the mechanics of online social games, which Bogost argued worked by dumbing down the user's interactions in order to be more efficiently monetized. *Cow Clicker* was made to be fully-functional on Facebook. But Bogost employed Brechtian-type

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[65] Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 22.

[66] This understanding of 'machinic enslavement' is taken from Maurizio Lazzarato's discussion of television. Lazzarato understands the TV as a machine that captures the viewer to the extent that 'we function as components of the televisual device, as its input/output element, its simple relays, facilitating and/or blocking the transmission of information, communication and signs. In machinic enslavement we literally form one body with the machine'. See Maurizio Lazzarato, 'The Machine', *The European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* (October 2006), http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lazzarato/en, accessed 05/01/13.

[67] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* 31.

'alienation effects' in order to introduce a parodic element: exaggerating and attempting to make plainly obvious the dumbness and essential vacuity of social gaming. However, Bogost's game, as I shall show, underestimated its apparatus: *Cow Clicker* inadvertently revealed more than Bogost had intended, by achieving a level of success comparable to the games it sought to criticize.

Bogost summarizes the way his game was designed to work in a post on his website titled 'Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession':

> You get a cow. You can click on it. In six hours, you can click it again. Clicking earns you clicks. You can buy custom "premium" cows through micropayments (the Cow Clicker currency is called "mooney"), and you can buy your way out of the time delay by spending it. You can publish feed stories about clicking your cow, and you can click friends' cow clicks in their feed stories. Cow Clicker is Facebook games distilled to their essence.[68]

The games that *Cow Clicker* supposedly 'distilled' are, primarily, those made by social game developer Zynga, whose most popular titles include FarmVille, ChefVille and CityVille. Eighty percent of Zynga's revenue is reported to come from in-game payments by Facebook users, and Facebook reported in 2012 that twelve percent of its $3.7 billion revenue came from Zynga.[69] *Cow Clicker* is based on Zynga's FarmVille, which allows users to tend to a plot of farmland with click-based gameplay. FarmVille is Zynga's best-known game and emblematic of the online social game phenomenon. It was launched on Facebook in June 2009, and reached ten million daily active users within six weeks. By January 2013, its sequel FarmVille 2 had a reported 8.1 million daily active users and 43.5 million monthly active users.[70] The game, like *Cow Clicker*, operates through users' clicks. Players begin with a simple farm, which they are given the opportunity to personalize and expand. They are allowed to plant virtual crops that can be harvested – with clicks. Online friends can also be invited to become their neighbors, meaning that they can help each other by sending gifts or charitably assisting - via clicks - each other's

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[68] Ian Bogost, 'Cow Clicker: The making of Obsession', *Ian Bogost* [personal website] (July 2010), http://bogost.com/blog/cow_clicker_1, accessed 02/03/13.

[69] See Ryan Nakashima, 'Facebook filing lifts Zynga, other recent IPOs', *Yahoo News* (February 2012), http://news.yahoo.com/facebook-filing-lifts-zynga-other-recent-ipos-224608214.html, accessed 01/08/2013.

[70] See Mike Thompson, 'The Top 25 Facebook games of January 2013', *Inside Social Games* (January 2013), http://www.insidesocialgames.com/2013/01/01/the-top-25-facebook-games-of-january-2013/, accessed 01/08/13.

harvest. The technology journalist Doug Gross explains that there is 'no way to "win"', instead 'players take satisfaction in building big, fancy farms that they can showcase to their friends'.[71] To cater to this demand FarmVille offers a range of desirable commodities (for instance, cute farmyard animals) that can be purchased with clicks. The 'click' is the most significant commodity in FarmVille's economy. Players are assigned a limited number of clicks, but can buy more. An article in TechCrunch magazine reported that as of February 2013, FarmVille (which is initially free to play) had generated over $1 billion dollars through such in-game purchases.[72] By creating consumer desire for the ability to click, Zynga established a wildly successful business model. Brian Reynolds, Zynga's chief game designer, outlines the approach in simple terms: 'We'll give you, whatever, 50 clicks today, and tomorrow you can have 50 more', Reynolds explains, '[b]ut if you want 100 clicks today, we'll sell you more clicks'.[73]

This restricted form of pleasure has led to numerous comparisons between online social games and the 'Skinner Box' (otherwise known as an Operant Conditioning Chamber). This was a cage developed in the 1930s by the behavioral psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner that illustrates the manipulation of behavior through simple stimulus and reward mechanisms. The Skinner Box revealed that a rat would become ensnared in an open cage that was fitted with a lever, which it could hit in order to receive a jolt of reinforcement – i.e. a food pellet. Skinner's test went on to show that the rat became conditioned by this process and continued to remain in the cage even when the reinforcement stopped. For critic Nick Yee, this manipulation takes place in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), in which clicking is a predominant part of the gameplay. Yee suggests that people on MMORPG games begin to 'feel achievement through continuous mouse-clicking', despite there

[71] Doug Gross, 'The Facebook games that millions love (and hate)', *CNN News* (February 2010): http://edition.cnn.com/2010/TECH/02/23/facebook.games/?hpt=Sbin, accessed 02/08/13.
[72] See Anthony Ha, 'Zynga's Pincus Says FarmVille Has Passed $1B In Total Player Purchases', *TechCrunch* (February 2013), http://techcrunch.com/2013/02/05/farmville-1-billion/, accessed 01/08/2013.
[73] Brian Reynolds quoted in Jason Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker: How a Cheeky Satire Became a Videogame Hit', *Wired* (December 2011), http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/all/, accessed 02/03/13.

being no reward or substantive incentive.[74] This means that the gamer's autonomy is compromised by the highly controlled system in which they are playing.

On this understanding, the players of FarmVille are ensnared like rats in an open cage. The 'alienation effects' employed in Bogost's game function to make this Skinners Box analogy clear. The game restricts interaction to merely clicking on a cow (by contrast, FarmVille's clicking involves various aspects of farm management such as plowing land, planting, growing, and harvesting crops and raising livestock), thereby foregrounding the prescriptive and monotonous labour required to play a game like FarmVille. All you can do in *Cow Clicker* is click on a cow. Furthermore, as in FarmVille, *Cow Clicker* allowed players to purchase in-game currency – 'mooney' – that could be used to buy more cows and more clicks. When a player clicked a cow, their profile would announce 'I'm clicking a cow' on the Facebook newsfeed, advertising the application and instigating competition in other gamers. 'As a play experience', Bogost explains in an article in *Wired* magazine, 'it[s]…nothing more than a collection of cheap ruses, blatantly designed to get players to keep coming back, exploit their friends, and part with their money'.[75] Bogost makes clear that he 'didn't set out to make it fun…Players were supposed to recognize that clicking a cow is a ridiculous thing to want to do'.[76] So, by glibly drawing attention to the phrase 'cash-cow', Bogost's application was intended to present the online social game for what it really is: simply, an industry with no gain for the player.[77]

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[74] Nick Yee compares the MMORPG *Everquest* to a Skinner's Box in an article titled 'The Virtual Skinner's Box'. He suggests that particular forms of online games condition their players into perpetuating specific operations: 'Once the rat learns that pressing the lever is rewarded, a food pellet does not need to be droed every time and the rat will still continue pressing the lever. It is in the same way that *EverQuest* shapes players to pursue more and more elaborate blacksmithing or tailoring combinations'. See Nick Yee, '"The Virtual Skinner Box", Adriane – Understanding MMORPG Addiction', http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/skinner.html, accessed 20/04/15.

[75] Ian Bogost quoted in Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker: How a Cheeky Satire Became a Videogame Hit', http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/all/, accessed 02/03/13.

[76] Bogost quoted in Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker: How a Cheeky Satire Became a Videogame Hit', http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/all/, accessed 02/03/13.

[77] Bogost details four aspects of this type of online social gaming that he finds to be problematic on his website. They are listed, as follows: 'Enframing' - a reference to Martin Heidegger's use of the term in 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1954). For Bogost's purpose enframing refers to the abstraction of 'friends' within social games; i.e. that 'friends' are treated as resources, both for the player and for the game developer, who relies on word-of-mouth advertising among friends to replicate the system and get more users. 'Compulsion' - this refers to the Skinner Box analogy, compelling players to stay in the proverbial cage. 'Optionalism' - Bogost suggests that social games

At root *Cow Clicker* was determined to reveal that our clicks (in a more general sense) have a material exchange value: they are a form of free labour exploited by service providers like Zynga. To help illustrate this observation Bogost implemented absurd restrictions on *Cow Clicker's* gameplay. A player was allowed only one click every six hours, and rewards required excessive dedication: for instance, a player would receive a 'golden cowbell' after reaching 100,000 clicks. Despite these limitations and the simple fact that the game was designed to create dissatisfaction rather than pleasure, it became hugely popular. It even maintained its popularity after Bogost announced the 'Cowpocalypse'. This was an attempt, ultimately in vain, to kill interest in the social game. Bogost removed all the cows and left only patches of grass (the resulting environment can be seen in fig. 2.9). Post-'Cowpocalypse' players could only click on blades of grass, and 100,000,000 clicks would be rewarded with a 'diamond cowbell'. The fact that players continued to play – despite the overwhelmingly meaningless, disappointing and fundamentally dissatisfying experience - exposes a strange and unexpected effect of the interpellation that takes place in the internet's technological apparatus: a form of radically empty consumption and radically empty pleasure indicated by our repetitive clicking on a schematic representation of grass that looks like a plain green rectangle for minimal gain. This can be seen as symptomatic of Maurizia Boscagli's diagnosis of contemporary mass culture in her book *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014). '[W]e are finally consuming the unconsumable', she writes, 'the very meaninglessness of life, and the impossibility of finding satisfaction in the commodity…now we consume both their immateriality and our recognition of their ineffectuality as commodity fetishes'.[78] And, as in *Cow Clicker* (particularly after the Cowpocalyspe), we 'consume the acknowledgement that we see through them'.[79]

Bogost did not anticipate this new form of radically empty consumer pleasure. His critique was not experienced as critique, but as just another game. Ironically,

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applications are divorced from any sense of challenge or effort, and therefore represent 'actuations of operations on expired timers…social games', he argues, 'are games you don't have to play'. 'Destroyed Time' - this point is self-evident. See Bogost, 'Cow Clicker: The making of Obsession', http://bogost.com/blog/cow_clicker_1, accessed 02/03/13.

[78] Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 243.

[79] Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*, 243.

Bogost himself also became ensnared in the social game environment that he had created. He admits taking pleasure in designing new cows for people to buy. It is as if he couldn't help but willingly participate in the machine of repetitive, meaningless and empty consumption that he had knowingly established as such.[80] 'I was spending more time on it than I was comfortable with', Bogost admits. 'But I was compelled to do it. I couldn't stop'.[81] We might suggest, then, that *Cow Clicker's* critical game was ultimately no different from FarmVille, or anything that Zynga has produced. In support of this, we can look to an unironic review of the game on a gaming aggregation website, which praises *Cow Clicker* as:

> a wonderful and addictive Incremental Clicking/Tapping video game…It allows you to buy a Cow and keep on clicking it to earn money that will help you buy more cows and upgrades. You keep on clicking on the cows to earn more clicks, use them to buy upgrades or send them to your friends and enjoy playing this brilliant time killing game. *Cow Clicker* is a great source of entertainment for all those who want to spend time clicking and clicking and clicking. If you love playing Idle clicking video games, you should definitely check it out. With all the wonderful visuals, involving and addictive game-play and easy touch, tilt and click controls, *Cow Clicker* offers plain clicking and tapping fun.[82]

In order to understand how the Facebook apparatus subsumed the purportedly oppositional *Cow Clicker* platform, and made it the same as everything else, we can examine Facebook's EdgeRank system. This is a tool, or algorithm, by which Facebook structures its content. EdgeRank arranges all objects existing in each user's network of relations (friends, liked products, associated groups, and general activity) and orders them on the user's 'Newsfeed'. Objects are ranked according to their 'edge'. This refers to the amount of interaction that the object has been subject to.

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[80] Jason Tanz details Bogost's personal obsession with the game in his *Wired* article. Tanz writes: 'Bogost kept his players hooked by introducing new cows for them to purchase using virtual mooney or real money. They ranged from the crowd-pleasingly topical (a cow covered in oil and sporting a BP-esque logo on its rump) to the aggressively cynical (the Stargrazer Cow, which was just the original cow facing the opposite direction and for which Bogost charged 2,500 mooney). They may have looked simple, but they were time-consuming to conceive and draw. By the end of the year, Bogost was devoting as much as 10 hours a week to Cow Clicker. Drawings of cows cluttered his house and office. "I was spending more time on it than I was comfortable with," Bogost says. "But I was compelled to do it. I couldn't stop." See Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker: How a Cheeky Satire Became a Videogame Hit', http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/all/, accessed 02/03/13.

[81] Bogost quoted in Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker: How a Cheeky Satire Became a Videogame Hit', http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/all/, accessed 02/03/13.

[82] Saif, '29 Games like Cow Clicker', *More Games Like*, http://www.moregameslike.com/20-games-like-cow-clicker-for-android-and-ios/, accessed 18/06/16.

More interaction means a stronger 'edge' and a more prominent position on a Newsfeed.[83] EdgeRank shows how Facebook orders, restricts and frames user generated content. It gives information a statistical value that is wholly indifferent to Bogost's critical intention. Therefore, whilst the *Cow Clicker* project went 'viral', it did so, we can suggest, only according to the rules of an EdgeRank system that ironed out its critical intent and parodic import. People played, and maybe people played sarcastically, but it all inevitably led to the standardized Newsfeed advert: 'I'm clicking a cow' - a disclosure, then, of the user's recognition of its meaningless and empty sort of consumption, which they nevertheless go along with. Presumably, this recognition has always been a part of Zynga's applications. It seems, therefore, that Bogost's game worked too well. And, despite his best intentions, each morning, 'millions of farmers around the world rise' to continue toiling in the digital fields of FarmVille and the empty pastures *of Cow Clicker*.[84]

It is important to note, however, that the monetization of our content and clicks by these Ideological post-State Apparatuses does not necessarily symbolize a wholesale transition from industrial modes of production. The idea of there being a simple transition, we can argue following Stiegler, is a 'myth' of the present age. Instead, glossing Stiegler's thinking, Johann Rossouw explains that a key development of the so-called 'post-industrial' period in Western countries was 'the attempt to not only control the means of production (industrial capitalism), but also and simultaneously the patterns of consumption – what Stiegler refers to as hyper-industrial capitalism'.[85] So, we can still identify the continuation of exploitative

[83] Technology journalist Jason Kincaid explains this process in more detail: 'First, there's an affinity score between the viewing user and the item's creator — if you send your friend a lot of Facebook messages and check their profile often, then you'll have a higher affinity score for that user than you would, say, an old acquaintance you haven't spoken to in years. Second, there's a weight given to each type of Edge. A comment probably has more importance than a Like, for example. And finally there's the most obvious factor — time. The older an Edge is, the less important it becomes'. See Jason Kincaid 'EdgeRank: The Secret Sauce That Makes Facebook's News Feed Tick', *Tech Crunch* (April 2010), http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/22/facebook-edgerank/, accessed 10/03/13.

[84] This phrase is taken from Doug Gross's research into Zynga's FarmVille. We can equally apply it, I think, to *Cow Clicker*. Gross states that the most common time for users to play FarmVille is between the hours of 8 and 9 am. So it tends to be something people do as soon as they wake up, becoming a part of a morning ritual. Doug Gross, 'The Facebook games that millions love (and hate)', *CNN News* (February 2010), http://edition.cnn.com/2010/TECH/02/23/facebook.games/?hpt=Sbin.

[85] Johann Rossouw, 'Translator's Introduction' to Bernard Stiegler, 'Suffocated Desire, or How the Cultural Industry Destroys the Individual: Contribution to a Theory of Mass Consumption', tr. Johann Rossouw, *Parrhesia*, No. 13 (2011), 52 – 53.

modes of industrial capitalism. For instance, Google has spread its infrastructure physically across the globe with a vast network of huge data centers and deep-sea optic cables installed at the bottom of the world's oceans.[86] Moreover the industrial scale of the post-industrial economy's operations, in many cases, maintains exploitative industrial labour conditions. The working conditions of Foxconn, a Taiwanese firm that manufactures Apple iPhones, iPads, Macbooks and various other computing devices, were exposed in 2010 after a number of employees committed suicide. Foxconn was found to withhold wages, force unpaid overtime and lack basic facilities.[87] The manufacture of such devices also requires the mining of rare-earth minerals, which, in turn, has environmental impacts. The journalist Jay Greene investigated, in 2012, the so-called 'mines where iPhones are born' - Baotou, North Mongolia.[88] Here the biggest hazard is the dumping of toxic waste materials into 'tailing lakes…Radioactive waste has seeped into the ground', he writes, and 'farmers have complained that their plants can't grow…and that their animals have become sick'.[89] Furthermore villagers near the tailing lakes suggest that the toxic environment has caused their teeth to fall out and their hair to turn prematurely white (an inadvertent branding, perhaps, of Apple's signature colour on their body). Alongside this, however, is 'the control of patterns of consumption to the point', Stiegler writes, where millions of people are connected every day simultaneously' to the same apparatuses.[90] This is what we observed with Facebook and *Cow Clicker*: the control of consumption to the point that the most banal action can be monetized

[86] See TeleGeography's online submarine cable map, which displays a vast network of cables spreading across the globe, http://www.submarinecablemap.com, accessed 01/05/15.

[87] See Kabir Chibber, 'Foxconn: "Hidden dragon" out in the open', *BBC News* (September 2012), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-19699156, accessed 03/03/13. And also Jay Greene, 'Riots, suicides, and other issues in Foxconn's iPhone factories', *CNET* (September 2012): http://news.cnet.com/riots-suicides-and-other-issues-in-foxconns-iphone-factories/, accessed 07/08/13.

[88] Greene's article, published on CNET, summarizes the main rare-earth minerals used in the manufacture of interactive devices: 'Minerals such as neodymium are used in magnets that make speakers vibrate to create sound. Europium is a phosphor that creates a bright red on an iPhone screen. Cerium gets put into a solvent that workers use to polish devices as they move along the assembly line'. See Jay Greene, 'Digging for rare earths: The mines where iPhones are born', *CNET* (September 2012), http://www.cnet.com/news/digging-for-rare-earths-the-mines-where-iphones-are-born/, accessed 07/08/13.

[89] Greene, 'Digging for rare earths: The mines where iPhones are born', http://www.cnet.com/news/digging-for-rare-earths-the-mines-where-iphones-are-born/, accessed 07/08/13.

[90] Bernard Stiegler, 'Suffocated Desire, or How the Cultural Industry Destroys the Individual: Contribution to a Theory of Mass Consumption', 54.

and, more strangely, experienced as a form of pleasure.

The study of online user monetization has been gaining traction in various fields of critical studies. Publications on this issue, such as Trebor Scholz's edited collection *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (2012), tend to argue that dominant modes of consumption have been altered by the internet to the extent that consumer activities are now more correctly understood as a form of labour.[91] Some commentators, however, maintain that service providers like Facebook repeat more traditional modes of production. Dave Beech, for instance, has argued that 'Facebook is Edwardian'.[92] He makes this claim on the basis that the 'Edwardian period [1901-1910] was the…era in which advertising became central to the capitalist mode of production'.[93] Facebook's revenue (and other major web services) is predominately income from advertising.[94] Indeed 'all it sells is advertising space…From an economic point of view, Facebook is an Edwardian venture…a brand that is also a medium through which other brands advertise their products'.[95] By this logic, Facebook's users are potential customers of the brands that choose to advertise on the site: they are no different to a person casually wandering through a billboard-laden street. This argument, however, does not account for the complexity of Facebook-like systems of feedback. By contrast, Joëlle Farchy contends that the accumulation of data by a user allows for an interactive and targeted form of advertising, thus turning, Farchy explains, a 'mass-media model into

[91] Trebor Scholz (ed.), *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012).
[92] Dave Beech, 'Facebook is Edwardian', *The Middle of the Beginning* (2013), http://www.m-o-t-b.net/writing/facebook-is-edwardian/, accessed 01/08/13.
[93] Beech, 'Facebook is Edwardian', http://www.m-o-t-b.net/writing/facebook-is-edwardian/, accessed 01/08/13.
[94] The scale of advertising revenue by online web services is explored in a 2009 paper about YouTube by Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson. They explain that (the Google-owned video streaming service) YouTube has more than one billion unique visitors each month (this is comparable to Facebook, which as of March 2015 reported 1.44 billion monthly active users) and because of this huge audience, the site can demand $175,000 per day for an advertisement on the websites homepage. This also comes with a commitment to spend $50,000 more on advertisements elsewhere on the site. See Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson, 'The Political Economy of YouTube', in. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau eds., *The YouTube Reader,* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 382.
[95] Beech, 'Facebook is Edwardian', http://www.m-o-t-b.net/writing/facebook-is-edwardian/, accessed 01/08/13.

something that is much more individualized'.[96] User behavioral patterns become a rich source of data, ready to be mined: realizing, perhaps, Deleuze's prognosis of Control society that 'masses become samples, data, markets, or "banks",' and marketing 'the instrument of social control'.[97] Similarly, Mark Andrejevic writes that online marketing is not only structured on 'the ability to target users based on an expanding range of information about their backgrounds, tastes and behavior, but also the ability to conduct ongoing controlled experiments to determine which forms of consumer inducement are most effective in managing and channeling audience behavior'.[98]

It is partly because of Facebook's accumulation and valorisation of quantitative data rather than qualitative content that Bogost's *Cow Clicker* did not achieve its intended impact. As long as it produced data (which it did), it was OK: it didn't cause any friction in Facebook's system, despite aiming to criticize its lucrative social game industry. This is perhaps because all activity and communication on Facebook falls under the rubric of 'immaterial labor', which, in Franklin's words, 'describes a radical dispersal of value production into all activity that adds value to an object or service'.[99] These are activities not normally recognized as work, but that, in Facebook's system of production are apprehended as purposeful or productive behavior. Moreover, Bogost's game was based on the premise that the users identify themselves as alienated. But this clearly was not the case. The user of Facebook, or YouTube for instance, owns the means of production of their product (i.e. video, photograph, personal profile), thereby, arguably, overcoming any possible alienation between the user and the object of his or her labour. Indeed Andrejevic speculates, albeit with some irony, that if 'anyone is promoting Marx in the current conjecture, it is not the critical theorists, but the commercial promoters of the interactive revolution'.[100] And yet, he argues, this control over productive activity ends up

[96] Joëlle Farchy, 'Economics of Sharing: What's Wrong with the Cultural Industries', in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau eds., *The YouTube Reader* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden), 363.
[97] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on Control Societies', 5.
[98] Marc Andrejevic, 'Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor', in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau eds., *The YouTube Reader* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 415.
[99] Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic*, Kindle edition.
[100] Andrejevic, 'Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor', 419.

redoubled and harnessed as a form of exploitation: the work a user does in building up online community and sociality in a proprietary network is recompense for the free services offered. This process of monetizing the banal minutiae of a user's daily activity seems to validate Agamben's seemingly paranoiac statement that 'today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus'.[101]

However these observations about free time as something controlled and functionalized were already remarked upon by Theodor Adorno in the 1960s. 'Free time', a term that had originated, he argued, 'only recently', 'has already expanded enormously… [and] is tending toward its own opposite…a parody of itself. Thus unfreedom is gradually annexing "free time", and the majority of unfree people are as unaware of this process as they are of the unfreedom itself'.[102] These comments, we can speculate, might go back to Adorno's employment in New York in the 1930s and '40s when he worked with Paul Lazarsfeld's Princeton Radio Research Project (PRRP), which carried out administrative research on the radio industry. At the time, David Jenemann makes clear in his account of Adorno's years in America, 'audience-testing and audience-measurement techniques were already an inescapable part of the economic and intellectual fabric of the mass-media'.[103] Jenemann details a 1946 report by the A.C. Nielson market research company, which described a highly influential instrument called the Nielson Audimeter that was designed to be fitted in the home and to track domestic radio listening habits. In many ways this instrument might be seen as a precursor to the current Ideological post-State Apparatuses, in that it represented the penetration of corporate surveillance technology into the domestic space. 'As a document', Jenemann writes 'it represents a moment in the history of capitalism when leisure time is transformed into a time of maximum productivity and efficiency. Even when engaged in such innocuous activities as knitting, the audience member is on the clock, creating surplus value for the sponsor'.[104] Jenemann's suggestion that Adorno would have found this 'irksome' does not come as a surprise.

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[101] Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 21.
[102] Theodor Adorno, 'Free Time', in J.M. Bernstein ed., *The Culture Industry* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 188.
[103] David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 26.
[104] Jenemann, *Adorno in America*, 30.

The market research technologies established for radio appear similar to those implicated in Facebook's monetization of 'free time'. We can only suggest that these marketing techniques have gradually intensified with each successive technology of information production and dissemination (i.e. television and now the internet).[105] Indeed the contemporary 'Neilson Audimeter' – i.e. the internet – is operating all the time and we are constantly interacting with it. Thus it is more thoroughly able to extract, control and induce particular behaviours from its user. In an essay published in Scholz's *Digital Labor* volume, Andrejevic argues that without its ever-updating veneer of newness and convenience, we would see the internet, and the growing architecture of interconnected objects known as the 'Internet of Things', for what it really is: a 'surveillance-based commercial infrastructure'.[106]

The commercial aspect of the apparatus is such that the user is always subjected to a form of measurement or surveying. We cannot casually use the internet, because at the same time we are always revealing ourselves, our interests and our desires to the system. These interests, desires and needs are estranged from the user and packaged as data, so that they no longer belong to him or her. This captured data is then returned to its producer as an external shadow-like object, which follows them around, mostly suggesting what they would next like to purchase or consume (as in, for instance, Amazon.com's recommendations based on your purchasing and browsing history). This is, I think, not unlike a peculiar situation detailed in Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). Here Augé describes the existential experience of non-places, which like various

[105] On this gradual intensification of marketing techniques and sequestering of free time, Dallas W. Smythe in 1981 wrote about the work involved in watching television. He writes that 'you audience members contribute your unpaid work time and in exchange you receive the program material and the explicit advertisements'. See Dallas W. Smythe, 'On the Audience Commodity and its Work', in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner eds., *Media and Cultural Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), .238.

[106] Mark Andrejevic, 'Estranged Free Labor' in ed. Trebor Scholz, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 159. The 'Internet of Things' is a term that refers to the general and expanding inter-connectivity of objects and their data production in a global network. Jeremy Rifkin describes its objectives in the following terms: 'The Internet of Things will connect every thing with everyone in an integrated global network. People, machines, natural resources, production lines, logistics networks, consumption habits, recycling flows, and virtually every other aspect of economic and social life will be linked via sensors and software to the IoT platform, continually feeding Big Data to every node—businesses, homes, vehicles—moment to moment, in real time'. See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 15.

internet services, require frequent checks of the identity of 'the user of the non-place'.[107]

> What he is confronted with, finally, is an image of himself, but in truth it is a pretty strange image. The only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard, in the silent dialogue he holds with the landscape-text addressed to him along with others, are his own: the face and voice of a solitude made all the more baffling by the fact that it echoes millions of others.[108]

This passage can be adopted as a vivid description of the type of alienation or disaffection that accompanies a user's estrangement from their data: reality becoming disconcertingly conflated with the said user's preferences, habits and desires. This might be usefully understood in relation to Marx's unnerving definition of alienation, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.* Marx writes that the '*alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, and *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it has become a power on its own confronting him'.[109] Thus, the 'life' that the worker has conferred on the object is remade as 'something hostile and alien'.[110] However, with the alienation of the user from his or her data in the present conditions of production, the external object is not hostile: it is remade as something much more chilling. It is overly familiar. The user is confronted by something friendly, cheerful and eager to help with their consumer needs.

This appropriation of the user's data as an external object, I think, supplements Stiegler's understanding of the contemporary subject (or desubject) as antlike, and the apparatus as anthill-like – or arthropod. In the anthill 'the consumer becomes the producer of the network *where he* consumes and *which* consumes *him*'.[111] Likewise,

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[107] Augé is here writing about the environments of multinational globalization (airports, supermarkets, departure lounges and out-of-town shoing centres), which often require the user's identity to be checked. 'Checks on the contract and the user's identity, a priori or a posteriori, stamp the space of contemporary consumption with the sign of non-place', Augé writes, '[t]here will be no individualization (no right to anonymity) without identity checks'. See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, tr. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 102.

[108] Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 103.

[109] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, tr. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 64.

[110] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 64.

[111] Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch,* 64.

the estrangement of the user from their data enables a situation where the user has produced the landscape that addresses him/her, and where he/she consumes. In doing so, it consumes them: for Stiegler, consuming and 'exhausting their desire'.[112] Here we can think of the experience of going online and being confronted by numerous familiar advertisements, or logging into a social media platform and being confronted by numerous bits of content that are all predetermined by our previous activity: our interests, desires and stimulations are worked out before we have even enunciated them, and offered back to us for repetitive consumption. Stiegler argues that our capture by what he calls 'industrial temporal objects', such as the internet, allow for an 'intimate control of individual behaviour, transformed into mass behaviour'.[113] It is an industrial system that 'discretize[s], affect[s], reproduce[s] and transform[s] every flux and flow (well beyond just language)…the totality of which results in generalized traceability and trackabilty'.[114] However, unlike the earlier conditions of production that gave us the sheep analogy, this economic system requires our constant work, and it is because of this work (production of data) that we are controlled. Moreover the application of critical claims to its social and cultural forms, as we have seen with *Cow Clicker*, is problematic because critical 'intention' appears to evaporate on its platform. One outcome of the *Cow Clicker* experiment is the idea that critical discourse online is inevitably flattened out and to a certain extent functionalized. Thus we cannot presume any critical impulse to survive online, despite the technology facilitating, for many, a reprisal of the avant-garde notion of an empowering active, co-operative or co-productive user. For all intents and purposes, it seems that this notion has been outmoded and functionalized with the online monetization of user activity and 'free time'.

However, the new 'public' generated by the apparatus also reveals new and unexpected forms of pleasure, expressed in, for instance, the disappointment and

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[112] Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery: Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch,* 64.

[113] 'Industrial temporal objects' appear with the cultural industries (cinema and records) and programming industries (radio and television) and develop to encompass internet technologies and digital audiovisual media. Stiegler glosses his understanding of 'industrial temporal objects' in the following terms: 'These would allow for intimate control of individual behaviour, transformed into mass behaviour—while the viewer, isolated in front of his screen, unlike the cinema, maintains the illusion of solitary entertainment'. See Stiegler, 'Suffocated Desire, or How the Cultural Industry Destroys the Individual: Contribution to a Theory of Mass Consumption', 56.

[114] Bernard Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, tr. Daniel Ross (Malden, MA; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 7.

meaninglessness of *Cow Clicker*. As we have seen, this was related to the failure of Bogost's critical project, since users willingly and enthusiastically participated in its unsatisfying experience: gleefully affirming the stupid role designated to them by the click-based social game and not taking on the critical position imagined by Bogost. The complex form of this new 'public', which confuses and confounds rather than reflects and criticizes, can also be glimpsed in 4chan, the anonymous online image-board upon which the internet meme first appeared. The website appears, on the surface, to represent an antithesis to commercial platforms, such as Facebook. It maintains a determinedly anti-commercial or a-commercial (it can be more correctly understood, I think, as indifferent to commercialism rather than expressly against it) spirit, which undergirds the unfettered nature of its chat, exchanges and eclectic image production. Put simply, the site is too unpredictable for most companies to want to associate their brand with. Indeed, 4chan's founder, Chris Poole, has argued that his system is unique in that it gives users 'a space to be wrong'.[115] In this respect, the site's aggressively policed anonymity, non-hierarchy and ephemerality encourages us, I think, to make historical links with the thinking behind Georges Bataille's early twentieth-century secret society *Acéphale*, and its celebration of a 'chiefless crowd' and 'loss of sovereignty'.[116] As it happens, Poole has recently, in January 2015, retired from his duties as 4chan's administrator; thereby relinquishing his status as the proxy figurehead of the site and further emphasizing the site's horizontal and 'chiefless' organization - this notwithstanding the fact that his retiring was due, in part, to financial concerns. 'Poole has never made money with 4chan', journalist David Kushner writes in a *Rolling Stone* feature, 'he tried to monetize the site's extraordinary traffic, but advertisers were always too wary of the site's content. Not long ago, he was $20,000 in debt and had moved back in with his mom'.[117] 4chan, nevertheless, has continued to thrive. Whilst 4chan has been subject to various critical claims, focusing on its playful and transgressive aspects, I want to

[115] Poole, 'The case for anonymity online', *TED* (February 2010), https://www.ted.com/talks/christopher_m00t_poole_the_case_for_anonymity_online, accessed 20/03/15.
[116] Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), 138.
[117] David Kushner, '4chan's Overlord Christopher Poole Reveals Why He Walked Away', *Rolling Stone* (March 2015), http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/4chans-overlord-christopher-poole-reveals-why-he-walked-away-20150313, accessed 21/05/15.

argue that it can be seen, by contrast, to precisely conform, or excessively conform, to the protocols of our existing society rather than opposing them, as is often argued. However, it is in this aspect that it is most interesting: revealing a form of the 'collective' that does not meet the revolutionary social expectations of the avant-garde and that does not altogether toe the line of the new economy's system of production.

### i hate u…

> Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison, he has found beyond himself not God, who is prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless…He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but he is more than me…and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.[118]

4chan has been called 'the asshole of the internet'.[119] It has also been referred to as the 'ninth circle of hell'.[120] And a *New York Times* journalist describes it as 'one of the darkest corners of the web'.[121] Essentially, it is a simple image-based forum where anyone can post comments and images anonymously. And they do: super-enthusiastically. The online wiki Encyclopedia Dramatica describes 4chan's anonymous community in terms that are suggestive of Bataille's abovementioned 1936 description of the anonymous *Acéphal*, exclaiming that their 'co-existence has created a fucking monster'.[122] Indeed, I want to consider 4chan in relation to Bataille's *Acéphal* in order to analyse the historical differences between their shared forms of anonymity, transgression and violence. Whist I have argued that some contemporary cultural forms, such as internet memes, aspire to express continuity with one aspect of the historic avant-garde (that of socially engaged praxis), 4chan,

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[118] Georges Bataille, 'The Sacred Conspiracy', in Allan Stoekl ed., *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 181.
[119] Nick Douglas, 'What The Hell Are 4chan, ED, Something Awful, And "b"?', Gawker (January 2008), http://gawker.com/346385/what-the-hell-are-4chan-ed-something-awful-and-b, accessed 05/11/2015.
[120] Allie Conti, '4Chan Cam-Girl Loli-Chan Grows Up', *Miami New Times* (October 2013), http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/4chan-camgirl-loli-chan-grows-up-6393598, accessed 11/05/15
[121] Jenna Wortham, 'Founder of a Provocative Web Site Forms a New Outlet', *New York Times* (March 2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/14/technology/internet/14poole.html?_r=3and, accessed 11/05/15.
[122] Uncredited author, 'Anonymous', *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Anonymous, accessed 12/05/15.

by contrast, recalls a lesser mentioned negative aspect.

The site is split into more than sixty generically themed message boards, but it is one board in particular that is the source of 4chan's notoriety and critical interest. This is the random board, ordinarily identified by the last character of its website address: /b/. When commentators refer to the internet's 'asshole', it is safe to assume that they are referring to /b/. Its community is described by anthropologist Gabriella Coleman as 'obscene and frequently barely literate – a nonstop stream of language and imagery that's often racist, sexist and homophobic'.[123] The message board is experienced as a flood of wilfully incendiary imagery, comments and pranks, and functions, in some ways, like a game: with users seemingly attempting to outdo one another in terms of provocation. Recently, for instance, an advertisement was distributed for a (false) feature of the new iPhone i0S8 called 'Wave'. This software update encouraged iPhone users to 'Wave-charge your device by placing it within a household microwave for a minute and a half'. This resulted in various new iPhone owners microwaving and destroying their phones. The hoax gained so much traction that the Los Angeles Police Department felt obliged to tweet about the sham-advert.[124] Also, in August 2014 a cartoon mascot/internet meme for the Ebola virus called Ebola-chan was uploaded and shared on 4chan. Ebola-chan is a wide-eyed, grinning anime-style nurse holding a bloody skull, with pink pigtails that morph into the symbol of the virus (fig. 2.10). On the forum, through various stages of competitive collaboration, this mascot eventually scaled-up into a full-blown myth about a Western cult who worship and idolise Ebola-chan - the so-called 'viral goddess of love and afrocide'.[125] 'Wherever she's posted', an article in *The Washington Post* explains, 'users are expected to reply with choruses of "I love you,

[123] Gabriela Coleman, 'Our Weirdness is Free', *Triple Canopy*, Issue 15 (January 2012), http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free, accessed 17/07/13.

[124] See LAPD Communications, *Twitter* (September 2014), https://twitter.com/911LAPD/status/514549848893579264, accessed 05/11/15.

[125] Encyclopedia Dramatica, a repository of information about internet memes, includes a characteristically obscene guide to worshiing Ebola-chan. 'You will always need to say I LOVE YOU EBOLA-CHAN or GOOD LUCK EBOLA-CHAN in all Ebola-chan threads or sites you'll find on the net. Another great way to help Ebola-chan is to do what /b/ cultists believe: You must sacrifap every night at 9 PM GMT (5 PM EST) and take pictures, video, audio or any other documentation of your fap. Excrete liquids on images of Ebola-Chan either printed out or however else you can. Finish ritual with either fire or blood sacrifice'. See Uncredited author, 'Ebola-chan', *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Ebola_chan, accessed 05/11/15.

Ebola-Chan" or "thank you, Ebola-Chan"'.[126] Moreover, various photos appeared online that documented shrines for the cartoon nurse, showing purported Ebola doctors (recognizable by the white medical bodysuits and yellow gloves often seen on news footage of the epidemic) gathered around in hand-clasped veneration. Rumours of a new Western racist cult were subsequently reported by some major news outlets.[127] Further to this, /b/ is the birthplace of the 'Anonymous' international network of activists (famous for their Guy Fawkes mask disguise) and in August 2014 its platform facilitated the hack and distribution of a series of private celebrity photographs, known as 'The Fappening'.

Because of its reckless and rebellious sense of humour, 4chan - particularly /b/ - can, I suggest, be likened to Bataille's 'Secret Society of Acéphale', which sought to establish a community that was not, in any way, constrained by normal social and political obligations. Both /b/ and *Acéphale* abandon individual being in favour of a headless, amorpohous anonymity; and in doing so, Bataille writes, realise 'a universe which exists in a state of play rather than one of obligation'.[128] In an eleven point programme given to new members of *Acéphale*, Bataille implored the recipient to 'assume within oneself perversion and crime, not as exclusive values, but as a prelude to their integration into the totality of humanity'.[129] He continues: 'Participate in the destruction of the world as it presently exists, with eyes open wide to the world which is yet to be'.[130] We can frame the activity that takes place on 4chan in relation to Bataille's demand to integrate crime and perversion into the human totality. The ethical stakes of this integration are glossed by Benjamin Noys, who explains, by way of contrast, that the exclusion of 'crime and perversion from the human totality is an act of violence that does not destroy crime and

[126] Caitlin Dewey, '4Chan's latest, terrible 'prank': Convincing West Africans that Ebola doctors actually worship the disease', *The Washington Post* (September 2014), http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/22/4chans-latest-terrible-prank-convincing-west-africans-that-ebola-doctors-actually-worship-the-disease/, accessed 05/11/15.
[127] See Dewey, '4Chan's latest, terrible 'prank': Convincing West Africans that Ebola doctors actually worship the disease', http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/22/4chans-latest-terrible-prank-convincing-west-africans-that-ebola-doctors-actually-worship-the-disease/, accessed 05/11/15.
[128] Georges Bataille quoted in Alastair Brotchie, 'Introduction', in Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Marcel Griaule, Carl Einstein, Robert Desnos and writers associated with the Acéphale and Surrealist groups eds., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, tr. Iain White, Dominic Faccini, Annette Michelson, John Harman, Alexis Lykiard (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 15.
[129] Bataille quoted in Brotchie, 'Introduction', 15.
[130] Bataille quoted in Brotchie, 'Introduction', 15.

perversion'.[131] And, moreover, that 'if we take on perversion and crime as exclusive values then we celebrate them as such and thereby increase their violence'.[132] Thus, a more authentic community would integrate these values rather than exclude them. This is because the exclusion of violence, in Noys's words, 'does not lessen the power of violence, it increases it'.[133] Indeed, Bataille's account of a deindividuated, anonymous and exaggeratedly perverted form of being, which assisted a new conception of community, is paralleled in some of the critical reception of 4chan. For some commentators, the website's mediation of its users seems to hold out the promise for a utopian form of post-racial and post-gender community, by scorching out any possibility for identity politics with its aggressive anonymity and playfully indiscriminate insulting of any and all forms of individuated identity.

4chan.org went live in October 2003. Its teenage creator, Poole, had set it up as a forum for discussing anime and sharing fan-art with a small community of friends. He acquired the source-code from a simple Japanese image board called Futaba Channel, whose web address was 2chan.net, and rewrote the site in English. The only thing that was altered was the translation of the kanji signifying Futaba's default username - 'Nameless'. Poole changed it to 'Anonymous'.[134] Following Futaba's model, 4chan offered fully anonymous posting with no required login or membership. It has expanded massively since its release. Poole began by sharing the site with a group of twenty friends, and without 'any effort or marketing' the image board grew exponentially.[135] At the time of writing 4chan boasts 615,000,000 page impressions per month, 22,000,000 unique site visitors per month and 1,000,000 unique posts per day.[136] The random /b/ image board accounts for nearly half of the 1,000,000 daily posts, and is responsible for 'thirty percent of the site's total

[131] Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 62.
[132] Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, 62.
[133] Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, 62.
[134] Julian Dibbell, 'Radical Opacity', *MIT Technology Review* (August 2010), http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/420323/radical-opacity/, accessed 24/07/13.
[135] See Christopher Poole, '(Founder Stories) Christopher Poole, (AKA Moot), Full Interview', *TechCrunchTV* (August 2012), http://www.crunchbase.com/person/christopher-poole, accessed 24/07/13.
[136] A page impression is the record of a particular web page loaded through a particular browser. Each time you load the page it counts as one page impression. All statistics found at 4Chan's information page for prospective advertisers. See http://www.4chan.org/advertise, accessed 12/05/15.

traffic'.[137] In an interview with TechCrunch magazine Poole suggests that the basis of the site's success are two features that were inadvertently appropriated from Futaba: user anonymity and its lack of an archive.[138] 'We don't have recognised user accounts, there are no structural barriers to entry, and anyone can go in and post a comment within five seconds'.[139] There is an option to use a pseudonym on 4chan, but it is uncommon. In an article for *Triple Canopy* magazine, David Auerbach observes how the technical aspect of anonymity has grown into a self-declared virtue amongst users, which is protected by a collective form of user policing. '[I]rritating the community can result in a member being deanonymized and "doxed" by having their personal information published', he writes: this is 'A-culture's [anonymous culture] form of ostracism'.[140] Moreover, it is common for users to remind one another that one should not behave egotistically. The practice is pejoratively known as 'leaderfagging' or 'name fagging'.[141] It follows that roughly ninety per cent of all messages on 4chan are posted under the site's default tag 'anonymous'. By maintaining this culture of anonymity, 4chan allows for an alternative way of being online, which differs from platforms such as Facebook. Anonymity was, Julian Dibbell writes, 'once thought to be a defining attribute of online interaction'.[142] Nowadays, however, it is 'widely approached as a bug to be fixed'.[143] He argues that

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[137] Lee Knuttila, 'User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency', *First Monday* vol. 16, no. 10 (October 2011), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 17/07/13.

[138] See Poole, '(Founder Stories) Christopher Poole, (AKA Moot), Full Interview', http://www.crunchbase.com/person/christopher-poole, accessed 24/07/13.

[139] See Poole, '(Founder Stories) Christopher Poole, (AKA Moot), Full Interview', http://www.crunchbase.com/person/christopher-poole, accessed 24/07/13.

[140] David Auerbach, 'Anonymity as Culture: Treatise', *Triple Canopy*, iss.15 (April 2012), http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/anonymity_as_culture__treatise, accessed 17/07/13.

[141] See Gabriella Coleman, 'Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action', *The New Everyday: A Media Commons Project* (April 2011), http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action, accessed 17/07/13. An example of this sort of policing in action is reported in another of Coleman's essays on A-culture. Coleman discusses the publication of an article she wrote for *The Washington Post* about the Anonymous group of activists that emerged from /b/'s A-culture. In this article she had mentioned information gleaned from an interview with an anonymous user, who had revealed details about his personal life. The anonymous community perceived this as a malicious infraction, and banned him from the server. Coleman quotes another user's assessment of the situation: 'Attempting to use all the work that so many have done for your personal promotion is something I will not tolerate', ('*grabs the shotgun*'). See Coleman, 'Our Weirdness is Free', http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free, accessed 17/07/13.

[142] Dibbell, 'Radical Opacity', http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/420323/radical-opacity/, accessed 24/07/13.

[143] Dibbell, 'Radical Opacity', http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/420323/radical-opacity/, accessed 24/07/13.

'the clearest demonstration of the internet's move away from anonymity has been the rise of social-networking sites like Facebook, whose appeal to both users and marketers rests on a closing of the gap between online and offline identities'.[144]

In the earlier discussion of Ideological post-State Apparatuses, I emphasized the promotion of a user-mentality of constant self-publication. This leads us to produce a mirror image of ourselves as a dynamic set of consumer preferences in order that we can be more easily surveilled and marketed at. This idea of our subjectivity being reducible to datasets was something anticipated by Deleuze, who wrote that individuals had become *dividuals* and socially recognizable according to certain metrics of data.[145] Anonymity, therefore, has no place in this system. Indeed Dibbell writes that Facebook is built on a model of 'radical transparency'.[146] Its founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg confirms this in an oft-cited statement that 'having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity'.[147] As a result Coleman has described the necessarily anonymous user of 4chan as a 'provocative antithesis to the logic of self-publication, and the desire to attain recognition or fame'.[148] In support of this she introduces the idea of 'possessive individualism', which, in this context, refers to the normal identity that is expected of us by corporate service

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[144] Dibbell, 'Radical Opacity', http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/420323/radical-opacity/, accessed 24/07/13.

[145] Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', 5. Deleuze's 'dividual' is the direct result of an individual's categorisation and functionalisation within electronic systems; however the term had already been used in a different sense by Brecht in regard to the representation of collectives in antique tragedy. For Brecht the 'dividual' represented a positive counterpoint to the over-privileging of the individual in bourgeois society. Summarising this point of view, Devin Fore writes that: 'Through its distinctive depictions of collective destiny, in particular, antique tragedy supplied a "representation of human coexistence" that conveys the profound interdependence between the person and the society in which he lives. These plays depicted not the individual-an autonomous unit that, as the etymology of the word suggests, cannot be further divided into smaller units-but what Brecht instead proposed co call the "dividual," a social being whose existence is defined through the public life of the collective: if the individual subject is produced through a process that Brecht designated as *Teilung*, a procedure of mere abstract mechanical division, the dividual subject, by contrast, emerges through the operation of *Einteilung*, a word also meaning "division," albeit division into an aggregate body. It is only through *Einteilung*, Brecht wrote, that communal existence is transformed from something that is merely "tolerable" a mass of isolated individuals-to something that is wholly "sensual" and properly collective'. See Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 181.

[146] Dibbell, 'Radical Opacity', http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/420323/radical-opacity/, accessed 24/07/13.

[147] Mark Zuckerberg quoted in Miguel Helft, 'Facebook, Foe of Anonymity, Is Forced to Explain a Secret', *The New York Times* (May 2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/14/technology/14facebook.html, accessed 13/05/15.

[148] Coleman, 'Our Weirdness is Free', http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free, accessed 17/07/13.

providers: encouraging us to view ourselves and everything around us primarily as commercial property. Coleman's argument, by contrast, suggests that anonymity enables users to practice a kind of individuality that pushes beyond this, and is perhaps closer to some sort of Keynesian utopia, free from pecuniary interests.[149] Lee Knutilla makes a similar claim in his essay 'User Unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency' (2011). 'The actions by uncontrolled and anonymous others', he argues, 'continually push beyond the simple binaries of you and I, self and single other, troll and victim, joker and audience member'.[150] And so the centrality of anonymity on 4chan is crucial to its so-called resistance of dominant forms of new media capital accumulation.

4chan's lack of an archive is also significant. 'The way the software works', Poole explains, 'is that you can only have something like 160 threads that exist at any given time on a specific board, and for every new thread that's posted, an old one gets bumped off'.[151] This leads to a flowing waterfall of information and image feeds. Every time a user refreshes the web page, they are confronted with a whole new thread of posts. The lack of an archive means that the content is both anonymous and ephemeral – once it's bumped off it disappears (unless it gets reposted by someone else).[152] This means that any one user's experience of the site is likely to be unique. Images and messages vanish as new ones are posted. User-generated content on 4chan has something like the quality of quicksilver: as soon as a trend or normative identity is established, it quickly slips out of grasp when the user refreshes the page – revealing a new iteration of the thread with new arrangements of content. Knutilla compares this experience to 'an encounter with

[149] Coleman, 'Our Weirdness is Free', http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free, accessed 17/07/13.
[150] Knuttila, 'User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency', *First Monday* Vol. 16, Number 10 (October 2011), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 17/07/13.
[151] See Poole, '(Founder Stories) Christopher Poole, (AKA Moot), Full Interview', http://www.crunchbase.com/person/christopher-poole, accessed 24/07/13.
[152] There are various other sites that will republish certain material from 4chan boards i.e. images and specific conversation threads. An example of this is the Encyclopedia Dramatica, a web alication which allows users to add, modify and delete content and which acts as an encyclopaedia of, predominately, anonymous culture (see https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Main_Page, accessed 13/05/15/). Nevertheless, on the 4chan system there is no option to view older posts, as there is on sites such as Facebook and Twitter (which contain timelines displaying a user's history of activity on that platform). Because of this, one navigates the site using the refresh key on the keyboard or browser toolbar, rather than trawling through pre-existent information.

anonymity, with a stranger in passing'.[153]

The archive is often understood to be synonymous with the bureaucrat: 'an agent of death', Boris Groys writes, 'who wields the chilling power of documentation to render life grey, monotonous, uneventful and bloodless – in brief, deathlike'.[154] It is in accordance with this line of thinking that 4chan's lack of archive appears radical: a preservation of vital life in an environment of total control. For instance, Knutilla celebrates the 'unique instance, event and state of becoming' on 4chan and applauds its 'complete absence of certainty'.[155] The experience of contingency enabled by the non-administered, non-archived and non-bureaucratic /b/ board, Knutilla writes, is 'truly radical and historically unparalleled'.[156] However, far from being historically unparalleled, we might understand this radical contingency in relation to Bataille's Secret Society, which was attracted to the symbolism of headlessness and sacrifice because both represent the severing of one's productive faculties (i.e. one's head) and, therefore indicated an unwillingness to invest in the present, as a reserve for the future. Instead the *Acéphale* opens itself to an experience of contingency, to the present, by destroying all ties to the existing conditions of production. For Knutilla, 4chan's imposition of anonymity and ephemerality operates towards a similar aim.

Nonetheless, it is typical for the critical commentary on 4chan to maintain careful distance from the website's specific content. Characteristic of this is Knutilla's remark that 4chan and anonymous culture 'holds promise beyond the often repugnant content generated by the site'.[157] An example of a characteristically 'repugnant' exchange on 4chan's /b/ message board is transcribed here:

> Anon - sup faggots this is my puppy sleeping
> it makes cute noises and shit and watches me play xbox
> jealous?

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[153] Knuttila, 'User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency', http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 17/07/13.
[154] Boris Groys, 'The Loneliness of the Project', *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory*, no.1, http://www.ny-magazine.org/PDF/Issue%201.1.%20Boris%20Groys.pdf, accessed 26/06/13.
[155] Knuttila, 'User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency', http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 17/07/13.
[156] Knuttila, 'User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency', http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 17/07/13.
[157] Knuttila, 'User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency', http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055, accessed 17/07/13.

> Anon - im jealous im not there fucking that dog so hard…[158]

In his 2012 article 'Anonymity as Culture: Treatise', David Auerbach confronts the content of anonymous culture and its tendency to manifest in aggressive hate speak. In his understanding this form of sociability is playful:

> Anyone entering into an A-culture [anonymous culture] forum is likely to witness a nonstop barrage of obscenity, abuse, hostility, and epithets related to race, gender, and sexuality ("fag" being the most common, often prefaced with any trait, e.g., "oldfag", "straightfag"). Anyone objecting to this barrage will immediately attract a torrent of even greater abuse. These forums maintain an equilibrium of offense…This is not to say that the participants are not racist; the point is that there's no way to know the views of the participants, even more given the self-referential irony in constant play. A-culture is hardly a utopia of free speech, but neither is it a fulcrum of hate speech. Yet the barrage inoculates against sincere, extreme hatred by making it harder for genuinely virulent views to stand out…[159]

We might suggest that in A-culture's willful abuse of civility, Auerbach discerns an aspect of 'sacred seriousness'. This is to say that A-culture generates intense involvement amongst its participants by establishing spatial and temporal borders (between the sacred and the profane or banal) that designate specific excessive affective conditions. In his 1938 book on play, Johan Huizinga argues that this sort of 'sacred seriousness' is the foundation of 'play'. 'Formally speaking', he writes, 'there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis court, the chess board and the pavement-hopscotch, cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle'.[160] These spaces, to which 4chan's message-board corresponds, produce intensive affects that Huizinga (writing in the 1930s) suggests counters the anti-play of 'our worship of technological progress, which was itself the fruit of rationalism and utilitarianism [and caused people to]…mould the world after the patterns of their own banality'.[161] In 4chan, this sacredly observed (thus seemingly

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[158] This is transcribed from an image on Encyclopedia Dramatica's entry for /b/. The image is tagged 'typicalb.jpeg'. See Uncredited author, '/b/', Encyclopedia Dramatica, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/File:Typicalb.jpeg, accessed 12/05/15.

[159] David Auerbach, 'Anonymity as Culture: Treatise', *Triple Canopy*, Issue 15 (April 2012), http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/anonymity_as_culture__treatise, accessed 17/07/13.

[160] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* [1938] (London; Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegen Paul, 1980), 20.

[161] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* 192.

irrational) 'play' fosters a spatial and temporal zone that counters the productive drive of the new economy. For instance, the 'equilibrium of offense' that Auberbach mentions, abuses the sort of singular identities that can be so efficiently mined and monetized by marketing technologies. This 'equilibrium of offense' - elsewhere referred to, by Auerbach, as an 'economy of offense' - ensures that no idea or act exists outside of irony, and that nothing can be taken more seriously than anything else. It can also be seen, I think, as synonymous with the logic of 'lulz', which is more commonly equated with online behavior on message boards.[162] On /b/ this sense of equilibrium is forcefully maintained. If not, the unwilling user will be alienated from the group. This is identifiable in the emotional distress recounted by users who have unwittingly mistaken this language and abuse as sincere animosity. When a user threatens to take severe action in response to abuse - such as suicide - a normal response in A-culture is to further ridicule said user until they leave the conversation thread.[163]

This form of play might be seen to epitomize an acting-out against the apparatus and an increasingly dysphoric 'world picture' (as explored in chapter one). Indeed the playful nastiness that is associated with the aforementioned logic of lulz, Enyclopedia Dramatica argues, 'is engaged in by Internet users who have witnessed one major economic/environmental/political disaster too many'.[164] As a result they

[162] Encyclopedia Dramatica's entry for 'lulz' is indicative of its aggressively ironic and self-aware humour: 'Lulz is a corruption of LOL, which stands for "laugh out loud", signifying laughter at someone else's expense (from the German concept of "Schadenfreude").This makes it inherently superior to lesser forms of humour… Just as the element of surprise transforms the physical act of love into something beautiful, the anguish of a laughed at victim transforms lol into lulz, making it longer, girthier, and more pleasurable…Lulz is the only good reason to do anything, from trolling to rape. After every action taken, you must make the epilogic dubious disclaimer: "I did it for the lulz."' This self-disclosure of the 'dubious' nature of lulz suggests that it is more compulsion than intention: as if the participating users just can't help themselves, whilst also remaining highly aware of their contentious actions. I will come back to this point later. See 'Lulz', *Encylopedia Dramatica*, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Lulz, accessed 26/05/15.

[163] In situations where a user threatens self-harm or suicide, it is common for them to be ridiculed as 'an hero'. Auerbach describes the origin and motivation for this sort of abuse: It is: 'A derogatory term for suicide, originating from a MySpace tribute page devoted to a thirteen-year-old suicide, whom a classmate eulogized as "An Hero." The term is a noun and a verb, and is used by people who post fake and real threats of suicide. The term deflates the act of suicide by replacing self-pity with sarcastic pride. It also deflates the they'll-miss-me-when-I'm-gone sentiment associated with suicide by retaining the tribute's grammatical inaccuracy. And there's the secondary effect of poor taste achieved by ridiculing a teenage suicide'. See David Auerbach, 'Anonymity as Culture: Case Studies', *Triple Canopy*, iss. 15 (April 2012), http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/anonymity_as_culture__case_studies, accessed 17/07/13.

[164] See 'Lulz', *Encylopedia Dramatica*, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Lulz, accessed 26/05/15.

adopt ‘a state of voluntary, gleeful sociopathy over the world's current apocalyptic state’.[165] Further to this, we might add the extreme commodification of one’s identity in social media (what Virno has called the the ‘valorization of all that which renders the life of an individual unique’ and the subsequent ‘fetishistic cult of differences’) as another antagonizing variable: on 4chan there is an uncompromising abuse of identity, the extremity of which produces no surplus or exchange value for the apparatus, only waste.[166] This is also reflected in the ephemeral condition of memes on 4chan, which are posted with the express knowledge that they will soon disappear and become inaccessible.

The key to why these communities are seen as creative forums of potential dissent is their supposed recovery of a playful, spontaneous mode of activity and interaction. Play has an important history of theorization on the left. Indeed /b/’s ‘equilibrium of offense’ might seem to reactivate the surrealist writer and sociologist Roger Caillois’s conceptualization of ‘play’ in his book *Man, Play and Games* (1961), which builds upon Huizinga’s account. Caillois considers the way in which play serves to suspend direct engagement with normal social and political life, allowing for a separate, uncertain and unproductive occupation. Caillois notes Huizinga’s remark that play is what ‘we might call…a free activity, standing quite consciously outside ordinary life as being not serious, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly…an activity connected with no material interest, and [from which] no profit can be gained…proceed[ing] within its own proper boundaries of time and space…’[167] Following this Caillois explains that play crucially ‘creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art…[n]othing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste; waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill…’[168] This Cailloisian sense of play, which is fully negative and non-productive, can be identified in Auerbach’s ‘equilibrium of offense’, and is present, for instance, in the site’s use of the epithet ‘fag’.

The term is employed as a label that denotes group membership. So, everyone is

[165] See ‘Lulz’, *Encylopedia Dramatica*, https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Lulz, accessed 26/05/15.
[166] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 110.
[167] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* 13.
[168] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961), 5-6.

a ‘fag’. It is one of the rules of 4chan’s game, which creates a sense of indifference to normal social codes. A new user is sometime referred to as a ‘newfag’, a compassionate user, a ‘moralfag’, someone who only contributes in the summer months, a ‘summerfag’, a homosexual user, a ‘gayfag’. Users also self-identify with this term. There is an attempt to preserve the stigma of the word, but drain it of historical meaning, leaving an excessive and abstracted sign of abuse. In doing so, the possibility of a genuine identity politics is cancelled out, through aggressively policed anonymity and a playfully indiscriminate smearing of all forms of individuated identity. Within this framework the possibility of establishing genuine intentionality collapses.[169] When used in this way, ‘fag’ does not come across as truly violent. Instead, it seems stupid and meaningless. Needless to say, the reclamation of the term in this context is different from the reclamation of other hateful slur words, as in, for instance, queer theory, where the insult is given a new positive meaning. The reclamation of the term at issue is specifically mediated by the social and technological parameters of 4chan: its anonymity and ephemerality giving full reign to a headless culture of sociopathy and involuntary hate without accountability. On 4chan the term is reclaimed only for its offense and offensive associations – it is treated with ‘sacred seriousness’ in that it does not refer to ordinary or profane life but instead to the specific spatial and temporal demarcation of the image board. It functions negatively, with the purpose of outraging and removing anyone not willing to comply with the site’s incendiary culture.

For Auerbach, this form of play is a legitimate means of self-determination for that community of users. He writes that ‘in making their own contributions to that [4chan’s] world (however unreal), participants establish ownership; the world

[169] By this I mean to say that 4chan’s culture makes a mockery of any sort of authorial intention. Indeed the difficulty that one might have in distinguishing between genuine antagonism and playful antagonism is known as ‘Poe’s Law’. This is an ‘Internet axiom which states that it is difficult to distinguish extremism from satire of extremism in online discussions unless the author clearly indicates his/her intent’. It is based on a post from a Christian forum by a user called Nathan Poe. Poe argued that ‘[w]ithout a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake for the genuine article’. This is, of course, further complicated on sites such as 4chan; where a sense of playful irony and general hate is foregrounded over and above any claim to truthfulness or sincerity. See Uncredited author, ‘Poe’s Law’, *Know your Meme*, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/poes-law, accessed 26/05/15.

becomes their own because it is distinct and detached from the real one'.[170] Furthermore this idea of an uninhibited community of collaborating participants has prompted the artist Brad Troemel to write an essay titled 'What Relational Aesthetics can learn from 4chan'.[171] In this article Troemel draws attention to an inherent contradiction in the trend for participatory event-based artworks, as described in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*: namely that they proposed a contingent form of social exchange via highly regulated situations in art galleries and museums. Instead, Troemel argues, 4chan's dynamic is more conducive to the desire for immediate social encounter assumed by *Relational Aesthetics*. The image Troemel uses to illustrate the essay is indicative of the argument: an image macro of one of Liam Gillick's colourful aluminium and Plexiglas 'functional utopias', entitled *Rescinded Production* 2008 (fig. 2.11). These 'functional utopias' were supposed to transform the gallery into a communal space, so it might operate, Gillick proposes, 'as a site for research, hanging out, viewing and production'.[172] Bourriaud celebrates Gillick's work for the priority it gives 'to the space of human relations'.[173] In opposition to this, the image Troemel uses simply emblazons Gillick's 'functional utopia' with a slab of Impact font, reading: 'Art produced from the social interactions of a network of participants. You're doing it wrong'. The implication being that 4chan is doing it right.

However, it seems too simple to heroise 4chan in these terms: as a site of 'playful' resistance to the internet apparatus. Indeed, as we have already seen with *Cow Clicker*, even expressly critical or subversive cultural forms are integrated easily into the protocol of the apparatus. In this respect, I want to challenge these narratives on the basis that 4chan simply does not fit its designated role. Indeed to a certain extent we can understand 4chan and its distinctive form of sociability to be precisely symptomatic of the internet apparatus. Although it appears to operate

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[170] Auerbach, 'Anonymity as Culture: Treatise', http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/anonymity_as_culture__treatise, accessed 17/07/13.
[171] Brad Troemel, 'What Relational Aesthetics can learn from 4chan', *Art Fag City* (September 2010), http://www.artfagcity.com/2010/09/09/img-mgmt-what-relational-aesthetics-can-learn-from-4chan/#_ftn1, accessed 24/02/13.
[172] Liam Gillick, 'A Viable Space' in Lionel Bovier ed., *Liam Gillick - Proxemics: Selected Writings (1988 – 2006)* (Zurich; Dijon: JRP Ringier, 2006), 103.
[173] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, tr. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 51.

beyond the internet's system of value generation (in that it is not monetised and fosters an environment of wasteful Cailloisian 'play'), its form of activity can be considered an expression of our functionalization within this system - 'play' representing the precise form of our functionalization. Indeed, 4chan seems representative of a kind of collective stupidity that is generated from our engagement with the apparatus. This stupidity is not, I want to argue, an expression of resistance, nor is it an expression of compliance. Instead it appears as a non-productive and negative epiphenomenon: produced specifically by the internet as apparatus. Digging deeper into the history of computing and online communities, we find a useful study published in *American Psychologist* in 1984 that observes similar behaviour patterns amongst networked computer users. Indeed this paper proposes a perspective that can be applied to 4chan's 'equilibrium of offense'. The article, titled 'Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication', claims that the type of uninhibited and violent humour that is common in computer-mediated communication might, more simply, be a result of that mediation. For them, it is a consequence of a user's integration in the machine. The authors suggest that:

> using the computer tends to be absorbing and conducive to quick response, which might reduce self-awareness and increase the feeling of being submerged in the machine. Thus, the overall weakening of self- or normative regulation might be similar to what happens when people become less self-aware and submerged in a group, that is, deindividuated.[174]

This early paper on computer mediated behaviour, quite remarkably, comments on 'flaming': a tendency to express oneself more strongly on the computer than in other settings. They write about the earliest internet, ARPANET, which was a collaborative research project between a subdivision of the U.S department of defence, MIT and Berkeley. ARPANET was initially designed as a means to transfer files and electronic mail between multiple organizations in separate geographical locations, which might serve to maintain government and military communications during a nuclear war.[175] Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegl and Timothy W. McGuire describe how the discussion on this modest peer network of strictly scientific and academic

[174] Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel, and Timothy W. McGuire, 'Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication', *American Psychologist*, vol. 39, no. 10 (October 1984), 1126.
[175] See Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 10.

computers nevertheless required policing for offensive content. Every few days it needed 'manually screening [for] messages…deemed in bad taste'.[176] Further to this, the paper contains details of an experimental study carried out with groups of people who were asked to reach consensus on a choice-dilemma problem in three different contexts, one of which physically separated each person and allowed them to use a computer anonymously. The data showed 'that computer-mediated communication had marked effects on communication efficiency, participation, interpersonal behavior, and decision making'.[177] Of particular interest in relation to 4chan, is the detail that while the group members using the computer participated more equally, they nevertheless exhibited what appeared to be 'uninhibited verbal behavior, defined as frequency of remarks containing swearing, insults, name calling, and hostile comments'.[178] Like the users of ARPANET, it is as if they just could not help themselves. The same might be said of 4chan's users.

This returns us to the concept of 'play'. Caillois maintained that play was a 'free activity' and therefore was consciously decided by the players in advance. However, this would not account for the involuntary abuse that emerges in computer-mediated communication and on 4chan. Instead it brings us back to Huizinga's analysis, which was in part based on the idea that play 'casts a spell over us; it is "enchanting", "captivating"'.[179] Moreover, its 'sacred seriousness' is only maintained on the condition that the participant knows that it is 'only pretend' or 'only for fun'.[180] So, as Robert Pfaller summarises, 'the excitement aroused by play can be achieved only by knowing better – by knowing that it is all 'only' play…*we will be absorbed by the illusion of play only if and when we see through it*'.[181] This accounts for the thrill of the participant sat behind the computer in Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire's experimental study and it accounts for the joy of the anonymous user of 4chan – they are captivated and play along on the condition that they see through its illusion,

[176] Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 'Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication', 1130.
[177] Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 'Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication', 1128.
[178] Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 'Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication', 1129.
[179] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* 10.
[180] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* 8.
[181] Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*, tr. Lisa Rosenblatt (London; New York: Verso, 2014), Kindle edition.

otherwise, as Pfaller writes, 'forgetting that it is "just" play would cause one to be only as interested in it as one is in other areas of life'.[182]

In this respect, I want to claim that any heroising of 4chan as a site of transgression, or for providing access to an experience of pure contingency, is overstated. Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire's observations indicate that the computer's screen-mediated communication actually induces the sort of unfettered play and economy of offense prevalent on 4chan. This would mean that the 4chan user's unpredictability and rebelliousness is partly an involuntary expression of their participation in the protocol of the apparatus. Huizinga's thesis that the 'sacred seriousness' of 'play' forms the 'origin of culture' can be reformulated as the origin of cultural reproduction on the internet – tying the user to its surveillance-based commercial infrastructure. This is to say that our relationship to the internet apparatus is fundamentally playful: it is in play that we reproduce the protocols of existing society. We see through the illusion of *Cow Clicker* but play along anyway, we see through the dumb illusion of our targeted Amazon recommendations but carry on shopping, we see through the illusion of Facebook's social system but nevertheless join in. It is all a dumb game and the apparatus gambles on our apparently inherent playfulness. Whilst we might contend that the playful notions of anonymity and anti-individualism have a history in leftist political organisation, here it only seems to display a sort of functionalization conditioned by technology and the requirements, perhaps, of our current situation, a defining feature of which is, for Stiegler, an all-pervasive stupidity or *règne de la bêtise.*[183]

Stiegler suggests that contemporary capitalism amounts to a rule of bestial stupidity, whose technological systems entrench us in a perpetual present, divesting us of the capacity to imagine any alternative. In this context, memes and the sort of acephalous community established on 4chan signal our adaptation to this system of bestiality. For instance, in support of the idea that we are locked into an 'interminable present' by the internet apparatus, we can look at Shifman's analysis of the orientation of photo-based memes toward the present. 'In contrast to the use of photographs as memory enhancers that enable people to unfold the narrative

[182] Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*, Kindle edition.
[183] See Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, 108 – 109.

constituting them', she writes, describing photography's more traditional orientation to the past, 'photo fads [like internet memes] are markedly a-historic: no relevant happening occurred before or after the moment the photo was taken'.[184] In this sense, Shifman continues, 'photo fads are not part of a larger story that is waiting to be told: they are the story itself'.[185] The presentism, or a-historic nature, of these images is further supported by Shifman's observations regarding the normally mundane content of the meme. Mundanity, in this reading, has its own temporality: in opposition to the event or major happening, the image of which would be anchored in a shared past, the 'mundane circulation of shifting images stresses the present'.[186] And, we might add, resists the idea of a shared collective consciousness with which to imagine a future. This is emblematic of Stiegler's *règne de la bêtise,* wherein humans are reduced to proletarianised *bêtes*, and lose the ability to, in Gerald Moore's outline, 'construct the promise of humanity'.[187] This proletariat carries no revolutionary promise. Indeed this is something observed by Virno, who suggests that the 'theory of [teleological] proletarianization fails when intellectual (or complex) labor cannot be equated with a network of specialized knowledge, but becomes one with the use of the generic linguistic-cognitive faculties of the human animal'.[188] Perhaps this reveals a deep and uncomfortable truth behind our fascination with the cute anthropomorphised animals in internet memes: we recognize our own life in them, because we, like cute animals, have little ability to question our participation in this system of production. Instead, this orientation to the present fits consumer capitalism's channeling of desire into the purchasing of short-term pleasure and other sorts of expenditure, which have intensified with the new non-stop and always available temporality of online consumption. Moreover, we can see the aggressively antagonistic humour of 4chan, and computer-mediated communication more generally, as a form of orientation and adaptation towards the present. This is because it is entirely negative: it belittles, abuses and burns out any idea of a positive future. We can here look back to the comparison I proposed

[184] Shifman, 'The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres', 353.
[185] Shifman, 'The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres', 353.
[186] Shifman, 'The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres', 354.
[187] Gerald Moore, '*Adapt and Smile or Die!* Stiegler Among the Darwinists', in Christina Howells and Gerald Moore eds., *Stiegler and Technics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 33.
[188] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 109.

between Bataille's *Acéphale* and 4chan's community of collaborators. *Acéphale* implored its accomplices to 'participate in the destruction of the world'.[189] However, 4chan does not have this agency. Its acephalous anonymity and aggressive humour only seems to signal a perverse participation in the protocol of the machine and with the new temporality of online consumption, which has a vested interest in locking us into the present. Indeed our archetypal online cultural forms have a strong underlying negative aspect that is often downplayed in favour of positive and productive conceptions of computer-mediated collaboration, as discussed earlier with internet memes. By contrast, as we have seen with 4chan and early instances of 'flaming' in Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire's psychological study, the way we typically interact and communicate as an online 'mass' seems marked by Bataillian concepts of collectivity. More remarkable, however, is that the implicit oppositionality of Bataille's acephalous community is now prescribed by the technologies we use, which seem to produce us as Bataillian subjects: anonymous, willfully transgressive, violent and perverse.

### coda, heads in freezers

In 2009 the contemporary artist David Horvitz initiated a meme as part of a project titled *241543903*. This artwork can be unpacked in a way that crystalizes the themes of this chapter and reveals how certain aspects of online culture point to the full realization of Adorno's notion of 'free time'. It also, I think, points beyond this analysis and draws attention to an aesthetic of stupidity in contemporary art and visual culture. With *241543903* Horvitz distributed an open request online for people to photograph themselves with their head in a freezer, and post the resulting photo online with a specific numeric tag, so that they would be automatically collated into a group. Horvitz's request read:

> Take a photograph of your head inside a freezer. Upload this photo to the internet (like Flickr). Tag the file with: 241543903. The idea is that if you search for this cryptic tag, all the photos of heads in freezers will appear. I just did one.[190]

[189] Bataille quoted in Brotchie, 'Introduction', 15.
[190] Transcribed from Uncredited author, '241543903 / Heads In Freezers', *Know your Meme*, http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/29846-241543903-heads-in-freezers, accessed 01/06/15.

Like most memes, Horvitz's project is mundane, immediate and has the same meaningless or disappointing promise of 'fun' seen in *Cow Clicker*. The choice of numeric tag comes from an appropriately whimsical source. It is a combination of the serial number of Horvitz's refrigerator and the barcodes on some frozen food packaging that was in the freezer. The artist's idea for the work also escalated from a dumb suggestion Horvitz made to a sick friend: that she should put her head in a freezer in order to feel better. However, the inhumane or mechanical nature of the nine-character numeric tag, to my mind, belies the contingency of its source: instead disclosing an identification code, similar to Agamben's understanding of the phone number or even a prison camp identification number, by which we can be tracked. This observation is crucial to my reading of the work. I want to suggest that the sort of playful and unrestrained community that is enabled by 4chan and the cultural logic of its imagery - memes - fits an Adornian conception of participation: according to which, organized participation (specifically popular team-sports) operates to functionalize the body for work.[191] Thus sport and leisure activities are associated with the 'shadowy continuation' of the labour process – there is an element of this in the participatory meme created by Horvitz, to which people contributed in their 'free time'.

The management and organization of labour in ways that maximise efficiency, profitability and accumulation have always been important aspects of technological innovation. David Harvey explains that throughout its history, 'capital has invented, innovated and adopted technological forms whose dominant aim has been to enhance capital's control over labour in both the labour process and the labour market'.[192] Crucial to this is the preservation and promotion, via innovative technological development, of 'the necessary mental conceptions of the world that facilitate productive activity, guide consumer choices and stimulate the creation of new

[191] Adorno writes, in his essay 'Free Time', that; 'by dint of the physical exertion exacted by sport, by dint of the functionalization of the body in team-activity, which interestingly enough occurs in the most popular sports, people are unwittingly trained into modes of behaviour which, sublimated to a greater or lesser degree, are required of them by the work process. The accepted reason for playing sport is that it makes believe that fitness itself is the sole, independent end of sport: whereas fitness for work is certainly one of the covert ends of sport'. Adorno, 'Free Time', 94 – 195.

[192] David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 100.

technologies'.[193] This corralling of labour is contained in Horvitz's *241543903* meme, which promotes a conception of the world - infantile and stupid - that conforms to the mindless frenetic activity fueling the new economy. Adorno further argues in his writing on the annexation of 'free time' by capital, that frequently it is in their leisure time that 'people first inflict upon themselves (and celebrate as a triumph of their own freedom) precisely what society inflicts upon them and what they must learn to enjoy'.[194] This is what takes place in the participatory meme created by Horvitz: a self-inflicted stupidity. *241543903* thus reveals a fulfilment of Adorno's comments about an endemic and enforced 'free time' that has become its own opposite, a parody of itself.

Horvitz's appeal for head-in-freezer photographs was extremely successful. A Google image search for the numeric tag reveals a mass of imagery: each showing an individual at leisure, with their head concealed and body awkwardly contorted to fit inside a freezer compartment (fig. 2.12). All participants follow Horvitz's lead: not quite like sheep, perhaps more like ants. In this respect, the project has generated a vivid and very accurate image of our functionalization for the new economy: since headless bodies (or bodies with their head in a freezer) can't speak, here we have anonymity without agency, and evidence of feverish, incessant and super-enthusiastic activity. The Google image search reveals to us an unforeseen representation of the contemporary Shockworker or workaholic: an apt image of the user inflicting upon themselves precisely what the new economy inflicts upon them, and what we are increasingly learning to enjoy. Perhaps there has not yet been a better time in which to update Adorno's pointed assertion from *Minima Moralia* (1951): namely that, every occasion I am on the internet leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse.[195]

Adorno's claim is popularly taken as a sign of the author's cultural elitism.[196] Therefore my appropriation of it might be taken as a sign of my own. However, I

[193] Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, 100.
[194] Adorno, 'Free Time', 195.
[195] The original line is about cinema. Whilst he was a keen cinema-goer, Adorno nevertheless felt that its system of entertainment threatened the autonomy and intelligence of the subject. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951], tr. E.F.N. Jephcott (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 25.
[196] Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 25.

want to clarify my use of the phrase, which partly results from Jenemann's useful analysis of stupidity in Adorno's work.

Adorno views stupidity as a 'symptom of domination', as opposed to a 'disability'.[197] Indeed Adorno and Horkheimer, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* write that: 'Stupidity is a scar'.[198] It is a mark of the subject's domination resulting from the inhibition or arresting of what Adorno refers to as 'thought'. Cinema was implicated in this process by Adorno, Jenemann writes, because it 'forecloses the two-in-one conversations that are essential to thought'.[199] It precludes dialogue with the viewer. A sense of self-doubt or reflection becomes less likely and the viewer is liable to fall back on their own, or societal, preconceptions. Nevertheless Adorno, Jenemann reminds us, enjoyed the cinema. Even his use of the word 'every' suggests that he frequented the cinema often and found some sort of pleasure in its 'inhibition of thought' and 'foreclosure of the two-in-one conversations'.

Therefore, Adorno's lament that 'every visit to the cinema leaves him stupider and worse' 'is not a statement of scorn but rather', Jenemann suggests, 'a confession of seduction'.[200] And again, explained differently, Adorno's admission 'that some cultural product renders him stupid is not a statement of elitism, but a profession of solidarity'.[201] For this reason Jenemann can claim that stupidity 'is always inherently political', because it provides evidence of our domination.[202] Likewise with my own analysis: whilst the internet user is clearly not equivalent to the cinema viewer, in that he or she is not a passive consumer, its form of user engagement nevertheless carries with it the threat of stupidity that affects us all. In this respect stupidity has a political aspect. Indeed, even though it is dialogical - encouraging conversation and exchange - the internet can be said to preclude Adorno's idea of a 'two-in-one conversation' by pinning us to our first-order impulses. Certainly the culture of 4chan can be understood in these terms. Its anonymity and ephemerality removes any sense of self-doubt or reflection from the process of participation; instead facilitating

[197] David Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', *Parallax*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), 35.
[198] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 257.
[199] Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', 44.
[200] Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', 45.
[201] Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', 35.
[202] Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', 35.

a culture of impulsive and dynamic hate. Furthermore, the meaningless data continuously produced on 4chan without reflection can be seen as a repetition of the processes by which we are made productive within the current system of production. These first-order impulses and preferences are tapped into by companies in order to capture our consumer habits. An article by Charles Duhigg in *The New York Times* details that 'almost every major retailer has a "predictive analytics" department devoted to understanding not just consumers' shopping habits but also their personal habits, so as to more efficiently market to them'.[203] Duhigg continues, explaining that:

> over the past two decades, the science of habit formation has become a major field of research in neurology and psychology departments at hundreds of major medical centers and universities, as well as inside extremely well financed corporate labs…As the ability to analyze data has grown more and more fine-grained, the push to understand how daily habits influence our decisions has become one of the most exciting topics in clinical research, even though most of us are hardly aware those patterns exist. One study from Duke University estimated that habits, rather than conscious decision-making, shape 45 percent of the choices we make every day.[204]

Thus a lucrative industry has established itself around these unthinking and unconscious habits, which are recorded in minute detail when, for instance, we click on this or that link, Google this or that thing, or repost this or that message: to the extent that one data analyst claims to know what 'you want before you even know you want them'.[205]

'What is "stupid" for Adorno', Jenemann writes, 'is not the misguided individual in contemporary society, rather it is the way that the intelligence of the autonomous subject, when confronted by the demands of a technologically mediated society, is always threatened with transforming into its opposite'.[206] This stupidity is also contained, as a threat, in the internet's Ideological post-State Apparatus. It scars our

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[203] Charles Duhigg, 'How Companies Learn Your Secrets', *The New York Times* (April 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shoing-habits.html?pagewanted=6and_r=1andhp, accessed 13/10/15.

[204] Duhigg, 'How Companies Learn Your Secrets', http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shoing-habits.html?pagewanted=6and_r=1andhp, accessed 13/10/15.

[205] Andrew Pole quoted in Duhigg, 'How Companies Learn Your Secrets', http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shoing-habits.html?pagewanted=6and_r=1andhp, accessed 13/10/15.

[206] Jenemann, 'Stupider and Worse: The Cultural Politics of Stupidity', 47.

visual culture, marking the pressure put upon the idea of an autonomous individual by the demands of the apparatus. It scars Horvitz's *241543903* meme and, indeed, scars memes in general; certainly it scars 4chan, which seems for all intents and purposes, a stupid, or automated (rather than autonomous), version of Bataille's *Acéphale.* This scarring stupidity, however, is also a sign of an implicit reversibility in the apparatus, which whilst appearing ultra-useful and super-productive also, as we have seen, produces a new collective subject that is passive, indifferent and involuntarily aggressive; reversing and confounding the fiction of a positive online community of active participants. To a point, this stupidity is simply the form of our functionalisation in the current system of production, however at the same time, this stupid mass can be seen to display what Baudrillard calls an 'immanent form of humour', which neutralises, confuses and contradicts any attempt to project a fixed identity onto its collective form.[207] Without doubt, this is the humour that inadvertently emerged on Bogost's Cow Clicker; not the humour of Bogost's satire, but the humour of its users, playing along despite the shoddy experience offered by the game, in the process stumping and negating the critic's subversive project. This is also why 4chan falls short and disappoints any attempt to conceptualize it as in some way avant-garde.

[207]Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities…Or, the End of the Social and Other Essays*, tr. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 30.


**Fig. 2.1** *I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?.* Image taken from http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/cheezburger, accessed 20/05/13.


**Fig. 2.2** *I'm in ur office earnin ur salry.* Image taken from http://icanhas.cheezburger.com/, accessed 20/05/13.


**Fig. 2.3** *I'M A CHIKIN LOL*. Image taken from http://www.funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/45958/I/, accessed 28/06/13.


**Fig. 2.4** *IF IT NOT FOR SITS WHY IS IT MADE OF WARM?*. Image taken from https://www.flickr.com/photos/skadallas/5124344047, accessed 28/06/13.


**Fig. 2.5** Harry Pointer, *WHAT'S DELAYING MY DINNER?*, 1872. Carte-de-visite photograph, 5.4 x 8.9 cm. Private collection.

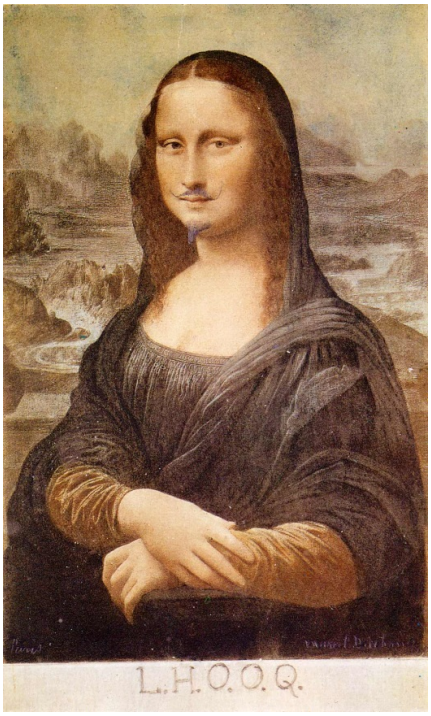


**Fig. 2.6** Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919. Pencil on reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa,* 19.7 x 12.4 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

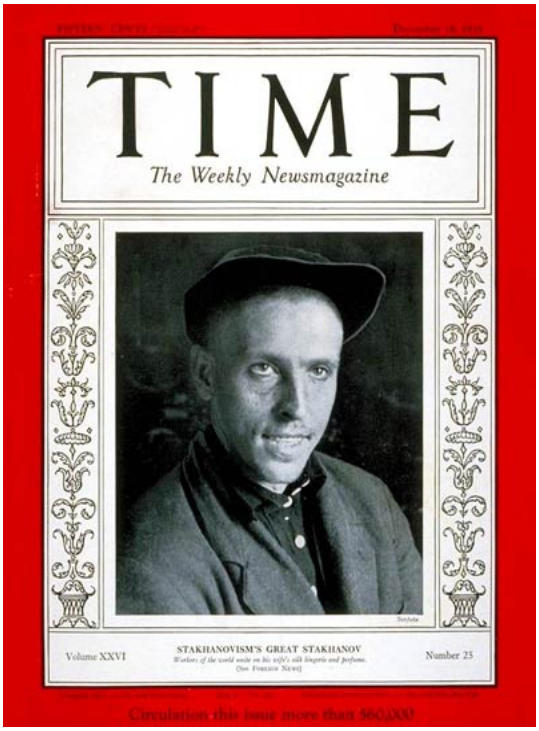


**Fig. 2.7** *Time* magazine, front cover, December 16th 1935. Cover Credit: SOVFOTO.


**Fig. 2.8** *Time* magazine, front cover, December 25th 2006. Cover Credit: Arthur Hochstein.

**Fig. 2.9** Post-Cowpocalypse pasture, Ian Bogost, *Cow Clicker*. Image taken from http://bogost.com/writing/blog/cowpocalypse_now/, accessed 10/06/13.

**Fig. 2.10** Ebola-chan. Image taken from http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ebola-chan, accessed 20/07/15.


**Fig. 2.11** Illustration for Brad Troemel's essay, 'What Relational Aesthetics Can Learn From 4Chan', 2010. Image taken from http://artfcity.com/2010/09/09/img-mgmt-what-relational-aesthetics-can-learn-from-4chan/art-produced-from-the-social-interactions-of-a-network-of-participants-youre-doing-it-wrong/, accessed 20/07/15.

**Fig. 2.12** David Horvitz, *241543903*, 2009. Image taken from http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/35102-241543903-heads-in-freezers, accessed 12/08/14.

# Chapter Three

## Jpegs and the Horror of Digital Photography

In 2015 I visited the archives of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, in order to view two works from the *Jpeg*s series by the German photographer Thomas Ruff: *jpeg ny06*, a nine by six foot picture of New York in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (fig.3.1), and *jpeg wd02* (fig. 3.2), a seven by five foot picture of a sun-dappled forest scene. At the time of my visit, these extremely large-format framed digital prints were in an industrial-scale refrigeration unit at the museum's depot in the Gyroscoopweg area, roughly six kilometres outside Amsterdam city centre. Here they are kept in the dark and at three degrees Celsius. This is normal for valuable digital chromogenic C-prints, which can degrade badly if not kept in appropriate conditions (they are significantly more fragile than analogue prints, which are not as light sensitive, and which the Stedelijk keeps at seventeen degrees Celsius).[1]

It goes without saying that I saw Ruff's photographs in an unusual environment. At first sight (with the lights flicked on), they are a contradiction in terms: the worst standard of picture quality preserved in highly fastidious conditions. The image quality is so bad that it is only by standing far back, or squinting your eyes, that the photograph's representational content coheres into something recognisable. Instead, what we see is evidence of the photograph's digital compression: blocks of opaque pixels (these are visible in fig. 3.3). Ruff achieved this look by downloading already 'bad' quality thumbnail-type images from the internet and then further reducing their quality using photo-editing software. In this sense, Ruff explains, the work 'explores…the aesthetics of an invention that has made it possible for images to be widely distributed via the internet'.[2] The resulting picture is then printed in limited edition at the largest available scale and at high resolution, giving the pixel blocks a

[1] I was informed of this in conversation with Anne Ruygt, one of the curators of photography at the Stedelijk. She also discussed the limitations for exhibition that are placed upon this type of digital print: such is their fragility (and financial value) that the Stedelijk's conservators have stipulated that digital chromogenic prints (the collection also includes some highly valuable Andreas Gursky photographs) can be exhibited for three month periods, with the proviso that the photograph will be subsequently returned to the depot's dark and chilled environment for three years before possible future exhibition.

[2] Max Dax, 'An Interview with Thomas Ruff', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev ed., *Thomas Ruff*, (Milan, Skira Editore, 2009), 72.

perfect, crystal-like clarity. The photograph is also housed in a heavy-looking dark wood frame: encapsulating the seeming contradiction that these works represent, the compressed and disposable structure of digital imagery collapsed together with the big money *objet d'art* status of contemporary art photography in one incongruous object. Indeed, my viewing of the 'bad quality' photograph in the depot's meticulously protective environment only served to intensify its incongruity.

This chapter is about the look of close-up digital photographs, as revealed by Ruff. Based partly on my experience at the Stedelijk depot, I will argue that this aesthetic represents a collapse of production values, in which the lo-fi becomes high end. Altogether I shall claim that Ruff's series of works turns data compression into a 'data sublime': taking and developing this term from Julian Stallabrass's analysis of the aesthetics of large scale contemporary art photography.[3] The 'data sublime', as manifested in Ruff's *Jpeg* series undoes the traditionally avant-garde category of the 'poor image': here understood as a form of image production associated with a certain set of values, such as, for instance, non-conformist, oppositional, democratic or agitprop. However, the poorness in Ruff is seemingly valueless, solely the result of a technical operating protocol. Its degradation is a pre-programmed function of image compression. In this sense Ruff's *Jpeg* series helps crystallise a key question of this thesis: what becomes of the avant-garde when its traditional markers have become co-opted as an orthodox protocol of our social and technological environment? Ruff is associated with a group of German photographers known as the 'Düsseldorf School of Photography', who studied under the tutelage of Bernd and Hilla Becher and achieved international prominence in the 1980s and '90s.[4] This was an important period in which photographs came to be accepted by art institutions and, crucially, by the market, as equivalent to painting. And yet, this development was, in part, prompted by a basic formal decision made by Ruff in 1986 after he left the Kunstakademie: a decision that ultimately also ushered his work into dark and

[3] Julian Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face: Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', *October,* no. 122 (Fall 2007), 82.

[4] This group, which also includes Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and Candida Höfer, all studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the 1970s under the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher (who became famous for their extensive photographic typologies of industrial buildings and structures). Ruff attended the Kunstakademie from 1977 to 1985 and also held a teaching post at the institution from 2000 to 2005. See Stefan Gronert, *The Dusseldorf School of Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009).

cold refrigeration (as in the Stedelijk depot in Gyroscoopweg). Simply put, he printed his images at the largest available scale. This represented a break from the Bechers' style, since their work was printed small and presented in a grid format in order to encourage a close, comparative reading of the industrial typologies that formed the basis of their work. By contrast, the newer large format made the photograph spectacular, requiring the viewer to step back to see it, therefore discouraging the attentive type of viewing implied in the Bechers' work. Whilst Ruff was the first of his peer group in Germany to print at a huge scale, other photographers working independently of Ruff in other countries also began to produce work of a similar size in the 1980s, such as Jeff Wall and Jean-Marc Bustamante. Nonetheless the process of scaling-up subsequently became characteristic of Düsseldorf School photography in particular. Indeed, this approach - which was later accompanied by a greater increase in photographic resolution and depth of colour, the use of luminescent aluminium or Plexiglas panels as print-surfaces, and a forthright embrace of digital retouching techniques - typifies the practice of, for instance, Andreas Gursky (some of whose photographs are printed up to seventeen feet long), Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer and, more recently, Thomas Demand.

The shift to a larger scale of photograph had two major consequences. First, it downplayed the specific content of the photographic image, making it more of an abstract surface. By this, I mean that we become primarily aware of the object-character of the photograph, rather than of its content. Jean-François Chevrier refers to this type of photographic object as 'tableau' in his 1989 essay 'The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography' (which also draws attention to the international reach of this style, referencing artists from the United States, Australia, Great Britain, France, Canada and those from Düsseldorf). For Chevrier, the tableau form 'summons a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator'.[5] This, he writes, is in 'sharp contrast…with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and "consumed"'.[6]

[5] Jean-François Chevrier, 'The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography' [1989], tr. Michael Gilson, in Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960—1982* (Minneapolis; Los Angeles: Walker Art Centre, 2003), 116.
[6] Chevrier, 'The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography', 116.

The large-format approach to printing was first utilised in Ruff's *Portraits*: a series of dispassionate passport-style photo portraits that he began making (at a smaller scale) in 1981. Ruff started printing these in large-format - seven by five feet - in an attempt to prevent viewers from simply recognizing their friends (many of the pictures were of fellow students at the Kunstakademie). Ruff wanted them to see that person as a 'photograph' rather than simply identifying the person in the picture. By printing large, the photographic object is recognized first.[7] In this respect, Stefan Gronert writes, 'he is no longer concerned with the picture as illusory reproduction of something else; his interest lies in showing that the construction of the image is at least equal in importance to the subject matter itself'.[8] Turning the photograph into a definite object works to resist what Vilém Flusser refers to as the 'naïve' idea that photographs signify 'states of things that have been reflected onto surfaces…[such that they] represent the world itself'.[9] Indeed, of his *Portraits* series, Ruff complained that '[m]any people peer through the photo to see what they want to recognize', because of this, they 'totally fail to see that this is a photographic image'.[10] The large format tableau-style photograph, by contrast, forces people to confront this fact: that the photographic image is an abstraction of the four-dimensional world into a two-dimensional surface - what Flusser calls a 'magic state of things' rather than a transparent representation of the world.[11]

The second impact of large-format printing was that it enabled photography to become a luxury art object, whose prices could rival and exceed those of painting. This is primarily because photography at a large scale looked more like painting than it did before. In addition, Ruff's decision to start combining the 'previously light, photographic sheet with a fine, dark, wooden frame' assisted the photograph's

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[7] In an interview with Stephan Dillemuth, Ruff discusses his series of large-scale portraits in the following terms: 'I don't give viewers a chance anymore to draw conclusions about the lives of the people I portray'. Instead he wants his viewers to respond to the images only on very superficial terms. Ruff offers an ideal hypothetical response: simply, 'aha, big photograph, big head'. Here the viewer receives 'the picture as a picture and say[s], thank you, Mr. Ruff, well done'. Thomas Ruff quoted in Stephen Dillemuth, 'That Remains to be Seen Many Things are Conceivable that have Little Basis in Reality', in Christov-Bakargiev ed., *Thomas Ruff*, 104.

[8] Gronert, *The Dusseldorf School of Photography*, 50.

[9] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* [1983], tr. Anthony Matthews (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 41

[10] Thomas Ruff quoted in Bennett Simpson, 'Ruins: Thomas Ruff's Jpegs', *Thomas Ruff: jpegs* (New York: Aperture, 2009).

[11] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 76.

transition into desirable art object.[12] The large scale of the new photographic object enabled its 'emancipation' from existing themes and tendencies in photographic interpretation, such as documentary and indexical representation.[13] This so-called 'emancipation' of photography from its subject matter is discussed at length in Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), which focuses on photographs that, like paintings, are 'manifestly the bearers of no intentions other than the artist's own'.[14] As a result of this transition, art photography was 'ennobled' and able to join painting at the apex of the art market. It had been remade, Julian Stallabrass writes in *Art Incorporated* (2004), as a 'spectacular creature of the museum'.[15] Stallabrass continues:

> Such photographs, made with large-format cameras, printed to the scale of grand painting, sometimes on aluminium panels, convey visions of the contemporary world which have a startling clarity and depth of colour. These photographs tend to be produced in small editions and at different sizes, making them as suitable for the museum as for the collector's living room. In the recession of the early 1990s, museums looking for spectacular and accessible works bought many of these pieces, and their prices began to climb steeply as a result. Now prices rival those of the top painters; in 2002 a large Gursky was sold for over £400,000 at auction, a record for a contemporary photograph.[16]

For Stallabrass, these developments, which ultimately sealed art photography under lock and key, in storage containers, as precious objects of financial speculation, destroyed the Düsseldorf School's potential to make 'critical' reflections on the world. He writes that whilst 'their modest early photographs [which more precisely displayed the influence of the Bechers] encouraged a critical reading of their subjects and matched banal scenes to deadpan photography…their latest productions tend to

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[12] Gronert, *The Dusseldorf School of Photography*, 44.
[13] Gronert, *The Dusseldorf School of Photography*, 13
[14] Walter Benn Michaels quoted in Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 336. Fried also includes an extended quote from Michaels, which states: 'the question about painting…has become the question about the photograph, not so much because the photograph can somehow be taken as the object it is a photograph of…but because it cannot simply be taken as a picture of the object it is a photograph of'. Michaels quoted in Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before,* 336.
[15] Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96.
[16] Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art,* 94. Of course, the figure of £400,000 which Stallabrass cites as record circa 2004 has since been far surpassed. For instance, in 2011, Christies sold Gursky's *Rhein II* (1999) for $4,338,500. This is, at the time of writing, the most expensive photograph ever sold. See Christies, http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5496716

transform contemporary scenes into epic, even sublime, spectacles, and tend to foster wonder rather than thought'.[17] Elsewhere, he writes that in a lot of these 'large-scale museum photographs' the viewer is 'overwhelmed by a mass of data that they lack the conceptual tools to make sense of'.[18] This is what he calls the 'data sublime'. In short, 'large-scale museum photographs' have become fetishized commodities: looked after like precious jewels and displayed, speculated upon and traded in global auction houses. In this understanding, their exchange value, supposedly, overwhelms everything else – the contemporary art photograph having become pure capital.

This isn't entirely the way I want to read Ruff's work, although, as I have indicated, I think Stallabrass's notion of a 'data sublime' is important. Nevertheless, to my mind, Stallabrass plays down what is most interesting in Ruff's work. Ruff's *Jpeg* series is not, I shall argue, entirely reducible to its economic value (as Stallabrass would seem to have it), although its economic value is an important aspect of my interpretation of the work. Rather I want to argue that the *Jpegs'* collapsing of production values (high definition photographs of the lowest resolution), represent an important reflection on digital photography and the way in which it mediates contemporary life. The photographer's interest in the 'construction of the image' as something 'at least equal in importance to the subject matter itself' can be productively explored in relation to this body of work, which definitively puts the structure of the digital image at issue: pushing its pixels forward so that they dominate the picture frame and obscure everything else.[19]

### lossy

Ruff's *Jpeg* series (2004 – 2007) comprises over 150 images, ranging in scale from six by six feet to nearly ten by twelve feet, each of which has been sourced from the internet, downloaded and compressed as a jpeg file of the lowest possible quality. Before printing they are also manipulated using photo editing software, in order to heighten the effect of the image's pixelation.[20] Whilst the particular subject matter of

[17] Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art,* 96.
[18] Julian Stallabrass, 'Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen', *October,* no. 138 (Fall 2011), 12.
[19] Gronert, *The Dusseldorf School of Photography*, 50.
[20] Commenting on the *Jpeg* series, Greg Hainge writes that: 'before printing these images are subject to a great deal of post-capture manipulation, pixels being moved in such a way that each pixel is itself

these photographic images can be hard to read, it is possible to recognize that at least half the images represent scenes of spectacular catastrophe, for instance of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11 2001 (fig. 3.4), and of American nuclear bomb testing in Bikini Atoll in the '40s and '50s (fig. 3.5). The rest seem to show unspecific landscapes or objects of architectural study. All the appropriated images have been magnified beyond their limit of resolution: a point beyond which the image's overall readability or indexicality collapses, and seems to shift into a form of geometric abstraction. The effect of this might be compared to the look of buffering screenshots of bad quality online video streams. It flips our perception of the image, forcing us up against a grid of pixels, which confuses recognition of the pictorial subject. Fried, commenting on the obfuscating abstraction that results from the *Jpegs'* extreme pixelation, compares Ruff's photographs to 'the pointillist structure of Neo-Impressionism'.[21] In a historically more direct comparison, we might suggest Ruff's compression produces a result that is comparable to one of Gerhard Richter's totally abstract colour chart paintings, such as *256 Colours* (1974) or *4900 Colours* (2007) (fig. 3.6). The *Jpegs,* however, contain nearly 100,000 individuated colour swatches, far exceeding the visual data in Richter's colour charts.

Ruff's series takes its name from an acronym for the 'Joint Photographic Experts Group', an international standards organization, which worked to develop a standard means by which colour images could be compressed.[22] The jpeg is the name of an image file type (it carries the common extension .jpg) that has become a ubiquitous and everyday presence in our visual culture. It is the most common format used by digital photography apparatuses (digital cameras, phones, tablets etc.) and the format

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regridded and thus expanded, emphasising the structural properties of the image, and some colours are altered also. The characteristics of the image that are emphasised by Ruff's manipulations are…artefacts of an image compression standard'. Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 218.

[21] Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before,* 154.

[22] The 'Joint' refers to it being a joint committee between ISO/IEC JTC1 and ITU-T. ISO/IEC JTC1 is itself a joint committee of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC). Its purpose is to develop international standards in information and communication technologies. See 'Mission and Principles', http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards_development/list_of_iso_technical_committees/jtc1_home.htm#JTC_1_mission_and_principles, accessed 21/09/15/. ITU-T is a division of the International Telecommunication Union, which also works to ensure the maintenance of global telecommunication standards. Its website states that their aim to 'develop the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies seamlessly interconnect'. See 'About ITU', http://www.itu.int/en/about/Pages/default.aspx, accessed 21/09/15.

normally used for storing and transferring photographic images on the World Wide Web. It was first detailed in a technical document, published in 1992 by the Joint Photographic Experts Group, which covered the requirements and guidelines for the digital compression and coding of continuous-tone still images. This document, titled 'ISO/IEC IS10918-1 / ITU-T Recommendation T.81', ushered in what William B. Pennebaker and Joan L. Mitchell refer to - in their co-authored book *JPEG: Still Image Data Compression Standard* (1993) - as 'the new international standard for colour image compression'.[23] These requirements and guidelines, through third party development, became known as jpeg files. The jpeg permitted the widespread use and distribution of digital images, which was previously impeded by the massive amount of space required to store high-quality, readable digital images. It overcame this impediment by providing a standardized algorithm. This allowed for an interchange of images between diverse applications and media platforms in a way that was both quick and cheap. Indeed, it is now so widespread and extensively implemented that the acronym is deployed as an informal name in and of itself: something that simply denotes a digital image. 'The purpose of image compression', Pennebaker and Mitchell state, 'is to represent images with less data in order to save storage costs or transmission time and costs'.[24] So, the less data required to represent the image, the better (cheaper and easier) for its users. Compression is achieved by 'approximating the original image…[therefore] the greater the compression, the more approximate ("lossy") the rendition is likely to be'.[25] Instead of reducing the image, in scale for instance, the image is approximated: i.e. data is lost. This is achieved via a mathematical formula called the Discrete Cosine Transfer (DCT), which negotiates the amount of damage an image can receive without losing its overall readability. In simple terms it decomposes visual samples into eight by eight blocks of segmented colour, which standardizes different colour tones according to a prescribed set of variables. The 'loss' is thus a loss of continuous tonality, as the image now contains what are known as 'blocking artifacts'.[26] This process, which reformats continuous visual information into discrete, prescribed and reproducible

[23] William B. Pennebaker and Joan L. Mitchell, *JPEG: Still Image Data Compression Standard* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 1.
[24] Pennebaker and Mitchell, *JPEG: Still Image Data Compression*, 4.
[25] Pennebaker and Mitchell, *JPEG: Still Image Data Compression*, 4.
[26] Pennebaker and Mitchell, *JPEG: Still Image Data Compression*, 38.

patterns, represents a fundamental difference between analogue and digital imagery. On this difference, W.J.T. Mitchell writes, in *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (1992), that: 'The continuous spatial and tonal variation of analog pictures is not exactly replicable, so such images cannot be transmitted or copied without degradation…But discrete states can be replicated precisely, so a digital image that is a thousand generations away from the original is indistinguishable in quality from any one of its progenitors'.[27] So, there is no loss of quality or degradation in the transmitted or copied digital image because the image is already 'lossy' and always already degraded.

This type of compression works successfully with digital photography by exploiting deficiencies in human vision. It works because our eyesight is relatively limited. Pennebaker and Mitchell explain that in normal use 'colour images can be compressed by Jpeg lossy techniques by more than 20:1 yet have nearly imperceptible levels of visible distortion in the reconstructed image'.[28] The bits of visual information that we are insensitive to are approximated more drastically. This 'lossiness' is also encoded into the music that we listen to: a phenomenon that we fail to notice because, like our eyes, our ears are somewhat insensitive. Indeed, the MP3 audio file format, like the jpeg, was designed for the maximum possible mobility and flexibility and is therefore designed to exclude information. Jonathan Sterne, in his book *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2012), details how early research in human auditory patterns informed the later development of the MP3 file. This mapped out the 'positions of the nerve endings and their responses to sounds', so that the 'zones of sensitivity and insensitivity' could be determined.[29] In this research, sound was regarded as phenomena not necessarily corresponding to something out there in the world. The faculty of audition came to be seen as limited and imperfect, and hearing (like vision with the jpeg) came to be seen as 'a medium…understood in terms analogous to the media that were being built to address it'.[30] And in terms that are similar to Pennebaker and Mitchell's discussion of the jpeg and the DCT formula,

[27] W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 12-14.
[28] Pennebaker and Mitchell, *JPEG: Still Image Data Compression*, 78.
[29] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2012), 100.
[30] Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, 99.

Sterne describes the practice of 'perceptual coding', which 'appears in a published work by 1988 and was probably in common parlance sometime before that'.[31] It is used to 'describe those forms of audio-coding that use a mathematical model of human hearing to actively remove sound in the audible part of the spectrum under the assumption that it will not be heard'.[32] For all intents and purposes, it seems that these regulations are embedded in our audio-visual language and inform our comprehension of sound and image, which now comes to us, for the most part, degraded.

'JPEGs are everywhere today', Cory Arcangel declares in his essay 'On Compression' (2008), and, moreover, they have informed the 'look' of the last decade: 'in case you haven't noticed, this look is everywhere else as well (ads, digital cameras, digital video, etc.) If the '80s gave us "hot" colors and "rad" graphics, and the '90s gave us slick vector design, then the '00's are giving us compressed blocky images'.[33] Rather than the ever-increasing audio-visual fidelity and 'realism' that is marketed at us by big-tech firms, the truth of the matter is that our audio-visual culture is premised upon an ever-increasing level of loss, damage and compression, which we don't usually experience as such. The jpeg, arguably, can be seen to have ushered in a new epistemic paradigm: where the enlargement or magnification of an object no longer renders it more precise or reveals more detail. By contrast, enlargement, as is evident in Ruff's photographs, reveals less detail, causes further abstraction and eventually displays absolutely nothing.

## hierarchy of images

Lossy, damaged and compressed production values are frequently interpreted and valued in artistic discourse through a familiar avant-garde position regarding the activation of the viewer as a critical agent. This is exemplified by Marshall McLuhan's discussion, in his *Understanding Media* (1964), of 'cool' and 'hot' media. It is also evident in more recent discourse surrounding the 'poor image', in particular the contemporary artist and theorist Hito Steyerl's 2009 essay 'In Defense

[31] Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, 21.
[32] Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, 21.
[33] Cory Arcangel, 'On Compression', in Steven Bode ed., *A Couple Thousand Short Films About Glenn Gould* (London: Film and Video Umbrella, 2008), 221-222.

of the Poor Image'.[34] Their point in common is that 'bad' quality images are more likely to enable viewer participation. Arguably, both accounts lean too heavily on a simplistic or binary analysis of production values, which Ruff's *Jpegs* complicate: we might say that these photographs are equally 'cool' and 'hot', both 'poor' and 'luxury'.

McLuhan's *Understanding Media* explains his distinction between 'cool' and 'hot' media as follows:

> There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition is the state of being well filled with data. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener.[35]

So, a 'hot' medium is something that comes to the viewer filled to the brim with data, and requires little viewer participation, as everything is already there in front of them and there is nothing to decode or ponder. On the other hand, something is 'cool' if it allows for some participation, letting the viewer fill in the gaps. McLuhan, writing in 1964 (before television arguably 'heated up', becoming more high definition, more ubiquitous and continually available), claimed that television was a 'cool' medium. In part he argued that the 'cool' promise of participation was evident in the staticky 'look' of television visuals. In his typically phallocentric approach, the static bursts of accidental colour, or blurring distortion (often referred to as 'visual snow'), which sometimes occurs on analogue screens, are made objects of libidinal investment. These moments when we become aware of the screen, the medium transmitting the image, remind McLuhan of the 'open-mesh' of a 'silk stocking': which is 'far more sensuous than the smooth nylon, just because the eye must act as hand in filling in and completing the image, exactly as in the mosaic of the TV image.[36] Indeed an image of stockings is used in McLuhan's book, *The Media is the Massage* (1967), co-created with Quentin Fiore (fig. 3.7). This idea is repeated by

[34] See Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', in Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle eds., *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).
[35] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 22-23.
[36] McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* 23.

McLuhan in an interview for *Playboy* magazine in 1969. McLuhan suggests that in 'a cool medium, the audience is an active constituent of the viewing or listening experience. A girl wearing open-mesh silk stockings or glasses is inherently cool and sensual because the eye acts as a surrogate hand in filling in the low-definition image thus engendered. Which is why boys make passes at girls who wear glasses'.[37]

The mosaic-like distortion in Ruff's *Jpegs* recalls McLuhan's thoughts on 'cool' media. McLuhan's conflation of less information or less data with a more active recipient or viewer is also inherited in some of the critical reception of the *Jpegs*. For instance, Bennett Simpson suggests that by zooming in and exposing the materiality of the jpeg, Ruff makes the picture 'less visible', in order to make it 'more visible'.[38] This process, Simpson continues, 'encourages viewers to see and analyse rather than feel'.[39] Simpson's argument is therefore premised on the putative 'coolness' of the *Jpegs*. They must, he concludes, 'rile art photography's increasingly mandarin penchant for elaborated and pristine production values'.[40] Certainly, when magnified to this extent, the digital image has a crepuscular and murky tonality, like dirt that won't come off. Its materiality comes to the fore: the *Jpegs* are inscribed with the marks of their functionality. Like a letter, a jpeg is an image designed to be sent, received and opened. A letter is permanently marked by the creasing necessary for its package in an envelope, and likewise the jpeg is inscribed and distressed with the gridded structure that is necessary for its compression.

A different argument is used by photography theorist David Campany, who nevertheless comes to a similar conclusion, in a variation on a Greenbergian modernist formulation regarding some sort of 'truth' to the materials. Campany suggests that, despite its cold and machinic nature, the 'pixel' is increasingly replacing the photographic grain as a 'sign of the virtuous materiality of the image' and of the 'virtuous embodied photographer'.[41] Campany writes that the pixel might be seen to inherit 'the connotations of "authenticity"' put upon the photographic

[37] Marshall McLuhan, 'The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan', *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969), republished by *Next Nature* (December 2009), https://www.nextnature.net/2009/12/the-playboy-interview-marshall-mcluhan, accessed 17/11/15.
[38] Simpson, 'Ruins: Thomas Ruff's Jpegs'.
[39] Simpson, 'Ruins: Thomas Ruff's Jpegs'.
[40] Simpson, 'Ruins: Thomas Ruff's Jpegs'.
[41] David Campany, 'Thomas Ruff: Aesthetic of the Pixel', *IANN magazine,* No. 2 (2008), http://davidcampany.com/thomas-ruff-the-aesthetics-of-the-pixel/, accessed 20/01/14.

grain in the '30s, '40s and '50s, when graininess was 'coded as a kind of limit to which the photographer and the equipment had been pushed'.[42] In line with either of these positions, it could be argued that Ruff's extreme enlargement in the *Jpeg* series symbolises a resistance to the perfectibility associated with digital media: revealing its structural apparatus, something that we aren't normally supposed to see. Back in 2003, Lev Manovich wrote that with increasingly high resolution imaging technology, the pixel was no longer present in the viewer's experience of the digital image: 'as far as the user is concerned', he claims, 'it simply does not exist'.[43] Thus we might see this work as a 'cooling' down process: draining the image of its high definition data in order to expose a skeletal support.

Similarly, a narrative of the 'poor image' informs much contemporary discourse about artistic experimentation with digital imagery. It is based on the premise that less polished media might increase active or critical participation. More specifically, the 'poor image' builds upon the *épater la bourgeoisie* aspect of the historic avant-garde, which sought to outrage the bourgeoisie, trash traditional art values, and offend the status quo with quick, crude and cheap materials. For instance, Steyerl argues that the jpeg is a 'poor image' and as such takes its place within a genealogy of 'non-conformist materials'.[44] Certainly the jpeg, as we have seen with Ruff, is, in some respects, a 'poor image'. It is glitchy, lo-fi and intrinsically 'lossy' or compressed. Superficially, these aesthetic traits can be seen to symbolise non-conformity or at least some sort of resistance to media spectacle and technological innovation. After all, the jpeg is designed for quick and easy distribution and the ability to transgress borders and elude boundaries (both geographic and technological) is marked all over its compressed and bashed-up appearance.

Ruff's *Jpeg* series, however, is rarely invoked in these discussions surrounding artistic engagement with digital imagery. When mentioned, as in Paolo Magagnoli's writing on contemporary artist Sean Snyder's use of digital compression, they are

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[42] Campany, 'Thomas Ruff: Aesthetic of the Pixel', http://davidcampany.com/thomas-ruff-the-aesthetics-of-the-pixel/, accessed 20/01/14.
[43] Lev Manovich, 'The Paradoxes of Digital Photography', in Liz Wells ed., *The Photography Reader* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), 243-244.
[44] See Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', in Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle eds., *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

simply dismissed as 'spectacular'.[45] The implication of such a dismissal is that their 'spectacular' conditions of production, sale and display contradict the true value of the file format, or at least damage its potential. By contrast, Snyder's work with compressed photography has, Magagnoli writes, a 'sober and minimal aesthetic'.[46] Unlike Ruff, he explains, 'Snyder's photographs are modest in size, unframed, and sometimes placed on white aluminium boards and glass exhibit cases'.[47] Synder's use of 'poor' images, in this understanding, symbolises a 'pedagogical' rather than 'spectacular' practice.[48] Again, McLuhan is echoed in Magagnoli's account of Snyder's digital compression, in which a disintegration of image quality is seen to open up space for the viewer's interpretation, presuming of course (as is typically the case in this approach) that the viewer wants to interact with the work:

> Technically, compression entails a loss of information or resolution. Nevertheless, within the artist's practice it emerges as the metaphor for a process of reduction and analysis through which images are questioned and new, unconventional readings can be generated. "Data compression results in the disintegration of image quality," wrote Snyder, "leaving space for interpretation (or over-interpretation)." For Snyder it is this "space for interpretation" opened up by the manipulation of digital software like Photoshop that makes the medium a vehicle for the questioning of mass media propaganda…[49]

However, I want to contend that Ruff's collapsing of production values – the 'cool' loss of resolution bound up with the 'hot' luxuriant commodity – in the *Jpeg* series should not simply be dismissed as 'spectacular'. Instead, I want to propose, it allows us to properly grasp the current historical condition of 'poor' imagery. The jpeg's poorness is the result of compression: an operating protocol, or dominant cultural logic, which mediates our perceptual capabilities – we become used to compression because everything is compressed. It therefore becomes difficult to assume a

[45] Paolo Magagnoli, ''Let Meaning Disintergrate': Digital Compression as Revelation in the Art of Sean Snyder', in Alexandra Moschovi, Carol McKay and Arabella Plouviez eds., *The Versatile Image: Photography, Digital Technologies and the Internet*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 226.
[46] Magagnoli, ''Let Meaning Disintergrate': Digital Compression as Revelation in the Art of Sean Snyder', 226.
[47] Magagnoli, ''Let Meaning Disintergrate': Digital Compression as Revelation in the Art of Sean Snyder', 226.
[48] Magagnoli, ''Let Meaning Disintergrate': Digital Compression as Revelation in the Art of Sean Snyder', 227.
[49] Magagnoli, ''Let Meaning Disintergrate': Digital Compression as Revelation in the Art of Sean Snyder', 230.

viewer's attentiveness to 'poor' image quality because everything that we experience is already 'poor'. It is in this light that I want to introduce Ruff's 'spectacular' body of work into the conversation about 'poor' images. We might see them as a measure, perhaps, with which to assess the jpeg's place within what Steyerl terms in her influential essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image', a 'genealogy of carbon-copied pamphlets, cine-train agit-prop films, underground video magazines and other nonconformist materials, which aesthetically often used poor materials'.[50]

The relationship between digital compression and activism that is established in Steyerl's text is arguably influenced by the media representation of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. In this period of revolutionary activity a visual language of digital compression slipped into the popular consciousness when compressed images saturated the media. Compressed and 'bad' quality images taken on mobile phones and digital cameras were distributed via proxy servers (web tools to mask your user location) and streamed around the world: they came to our screens blocky. Digital compression was essential for the spread of information through compromised channels. It became a form of political visibility for the protestor on a global stage. Eyewitness accounts of the escalating events could be captured and distributed quickly on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, spreading information much faster than traditional media outlets. These images were grainy, glitchy, distorted and 'poor'. In an article in the Guardian, Peter Beaumont considers what the 'defining image' of the 'Arab Spring' might be:

> that defining image is this: a young woman or a young man with a smartphone. She's in the Medina in Tunis with a BlackBerry held aloft, taking a picture of a demonstration outside the prime minister's house. He is an angry Egyptian doctor in an aid station stooping to capture the image of a man with a head injury from missiles thrown by Mubarak's supporters. Or it is a Libyan in Benghazi running with his phone switched to a jerky video mode, surprised when the youth in front of him is shot through the head.[51]

That 'defining image' is a 'poor' image: stooped, jerky and compressed. Certainly, this type of image was a significant actor in the revolution. And this notion of the 'poor' image having a particular kind of agency is echoed in Steyerl's essay. 'Poor

[50] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 43 – 44.
[51] Peter Beaumont, 'The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world', *The Guardian* (February 2011), http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya, accessed 30/09/15.

images', she writes, 'are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly'.[52] They 'lose matter and gain speed'.[53] The poorer and more compressed the image, the lighter, more portable and more evasive. The associated loss of quality, moreover, is something that counters 'the contemporary hierarchy of images…based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution'.[54] Thus, for Steyerl, the jpeg is a 'lumpen-proletariat in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution'.[55] In this understanding values such as focus, resolution, sharpness and clarity of content imply class privilege. They become new markers of bourgeois comfort. On the other hand, a compressed, ripped, remixed, copied and pasted aesthetic is the visual language of a new proletariat. This new visual language is one that 'strips quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction'.[56] This image, which loses part of its 'visual substance' through compression, 'recovers some of its political punch…[and] builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates'.[57]

Steyerl's narrative of the 'poor image' is related to certain avant-gardist strategies that foreground the material properties of the apparatus in order to shock and disrupt the ideological illusions of media spectacle. For instance, her argument repeats some of the concerns of structural-materialist filmmakers in the 1970s (such as, for instance, Hollis Framption, Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage), who sought 'to demystify the film process'.[58] Structural film did so by making visible the various, often shoddy-seeming editing techniques used in commercial cinema (lighting effects, slow motion etc.) that manipulate our affective response to the film and which we don't tend to perceive in normal experience. Steyerl's discussion of the compressed and shoddy-seeming jpeg is built on a similar claim. '[A]lthough they are frequently drawn from commercial media and circulate via networks that support

[52] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 41.
[53] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 41.
[54] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 32.
[55] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 32.
[56] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 32.
[57] Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', 42.
[58] Here I'm particularly thinking of the theorist Peter Gidal, who suggested that this type of filmmaking worked 'to demystify the film process'. See Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', in Peter Gidal ed., *Structural Film Anthology* (London: BFI, 1976), 1.

corporate and state interests', Lucy Soutter writes, in her commentary on Steyerl's account of digital 'poor' images, they 'may have subversive effects…they have the potential to undercut spectacle in the ways that they are used'.[59]

T.J Demos's discussion of Steyerl's artistic practice in his book *The Migrant Image* (2013) sustains this proposition regarding material 'weakness' or 'poorness' in the art work. He devotes a long discussion to Steyerl's 'essayistic documentary' video work and, in part, discusses her employment of 'poor' production values as a destabilising element. For instance, Demos argues that the 'poor' quality of images in this context (owing to multiple generations of copies and the recording of imagery directly off the TV screen) has the effect of 'derealiz[ing] the video's referents'.[60] It lessens the image's ideological inscription, helping to 'reveal the intrinsic malleability of video's meanings'.[61] Again, the glitchy or lossy image is associated with a mode of reception that creates an active, even liberated, form of spectatorship. Steyerl, Demos writes, does not fetishize high-definition, rather she 'appears politically committed to her images' low resolution'.[62] Poor production values are synonymous with political commitment, on this account the narrative of the 'poor' image, as these writers present it, is a narrative of resistance and oppositionality; a means of disrupting the teleology of technological progress with a flow of bad, substandard, weak and deficient images. Indeed, Boris Groys argues in his essay 'The Weak Universalism' (2010), that the avant-garde has always sought to make the weakest and worst possible images in order to interrupt and stymie the violence of technological progress.[63] Thus it is suggested that the hopes of the avant-garde flicker, and live on, in this aspect of visual culture.

We can draw parallels between these arguments regarding the critical potential of

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[59] Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 102 - 103

[60] T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 82.

[61] Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis,* 88.

[62] Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis,* 88.

[63] 'The avant-garde is often associated with the notion of progress - especially technological progress. Indeed, one can find many statements by avant-garde artists and theorists directed against conservatives and insisting on the futility of practicing old forms of art under new conditions determined by new technology. But this new technology was interpreted - at least by the first generation of avant-garde artists - not as a chance to build a new, stable world, but as a machine promising destruction of the old world, as well as the permanent self-destruction of modern technological civilization itself. The avant-garde perceived the forces of progress as predominantly destructive ones'. Boris Groys, 'The Weak Universalism', *e-flux*, journal #15 (April 2010), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-weak-universalism/, accessed 10/10/13.

'low resolution' and the use of shoddy materials in artistic practice, and the work associated with *Arte Povera*: an Italian neo avant-garde movement in the '60s and '70s (whose name makes this the most obvious point of reference). Writing about the links between the Italian historic avant-garde and *Arte Povera*, Karen Pinkus draws attention to their shared use of cheap and disposable materials: sculptures made of cardboard, tissue paper, chicken wire and mirrors. These materials, she writes, 'increase the potential for movement in the work of art'.[64] This dematerialization of the art work into assemblages of disposable materials (in contradistinction to the static and flat surface of the canvas) manifested a 'ridding oneself of excess objects…of trying to climb out from behind commodities and strip one's work down to a bare distillation'.[65] The 'poorness' of *Arte Povera* was authenticated through its presentation of an object stripped of reification. The use of such materials put the work at a remove from the conspicuous consumption of commodity culture. The weakness and insubstantiality of the object supposedly allows it to evade the magnetic pull of capitalist culture and the status quo of what Groys calls 'strong images'.[66] In this understanding, it is through its material 'weakness' that the avant-garde maintains its critical relation to society.

Ruff's series of *Jpegs* demands our attention because it upsets this long-standing genealogy of 'poor' materials. Indeed, there is an utter incompatibility between Ruff's series and these accounts of 'poor' quality. Ruff's 'poor' images, printed lush and large and framed nicely in dark wood, form a fascinating counterpoint to this narrative. They remind us of the risk of fetishizing 'poor' quality in an artwork – particularly when, as with the jpeg, that 'poorness' is the result of a technical operating protocol. Often, in the accounts I have quoted, it is made to seem as if

[64] Karen Pinkus, 'Dematerialization: From Arte Povera to Cybermoney through Italian Thought', *diacritics*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 64.
[65] Pinkus, 'Dematerialization: From Arte Povera to Cybermoney through Italian Thought', 66.
[66] Interestingly, we might point out that Groys's idea of the avant-garde could in this regard be compared to the Greenbergian account of modern painting, in which reduction of form down to its purest elements can be seen as a form of compression. Indeed, Clement Greenberg observes, in his influential essay '"American-type" Painting' (1955), that it 'seems to be a law of modernism…that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized'. He calls this a process of 'self-purification'. Like Groys, Greenberg places the work of art in direct opposition to technologized commercial culture. Indeed Groys's term 'strong images' might be seen as synonymous with Greenberg's 'kitsch'. Needless to say, such a reading wouldn't be acknowledged by Groys himself. Clement Greenberg, '"American-type" Painting' [1955], *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 208. See also Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' [1939], *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

these aesthetic traits are automatically in possession of critical, subversive or creative power.[67] It is as if the artwork, or technology, is theorized as 'political', 'critical' and 'creative' so that we don't have to be. This is a tendency to which we might apply Jodi Dean's description of the current technologized, or 'communicative', stage of capitalism, within which technological fetishes often work to cover over 'a lack on the part of the subject':

> That is to say, it protects the fantasy of an active, engaged subject by acting in the subject's stead. The technological fetish "is political" for us, enabling us to go about the rest of our lives relieved of the guilt that we might not be doing our part and secure in the belief that we are after all informed, engaged citizens. The paradox of the technological fetish is that the technology acting in our stead actually enables us to remain politically passive. We don't have to assume political responsibility because, again, the technology is doing it for us.[68]

From this perspective, the 'poor' image might be seen, more simply, as a support for all our fantasies of political action. This notion is embodied, perhaps at its most extreme, in media theorist McKenzie Wark's claim that every compressed and shared file can be seen as an act of *détournement*: 'every kid with a bitorrent [a protocol for peer-to-peer file sharing] client', he writes, 'is an unconscious situationist in the making'.[69] However, if the ubiquitous practice of compressing and sharing a file (by some estimates file-sharing accounts for nearly one third of all internet traffic) is an act of situationist *détournement*, then nearly everything is

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[67] An instance where 'poor' and 'glitchy' quality is seen to be almost synonymous with 'immediacy' and 'artistic freedom', is the 'crappy camera' movement that took root in the USA in the 1960s, where photographers would use cheap plastic cameras (such as the *Diana*), encouraging them to 'loosen up and shoot with spontaneous abandon'. Of this movement, the curator David Featherstone wrote of a 'widespread feeling of satisfaction gained in making viable, important and high quality photographic images using cheap, uncomplicated equipment in the face of a medium which seems to thrive on advanced technology'. See David Featherstone, *The Diana Show: Pictures through a Plastic Lens* (Carmel, CA: Friends of Photography, 1980), 8. In an essay on uses of iPhones in certain artistic practices, the curator Mia Fineman talks about the parallels between the 'crappy camera' movement and contemporary artists who use the iPhone camera as part of their practice. She explains that, in contrast to amateur iPhoneographers (who tend to beautify their photos using photo filters), artists 'tend to embrace the limitations of the camera phone and to reject any overt image limitation'. For Fineman this embrace of the camera's defects signals a 'renewed sense of artistic freedom and possibility'. However, to my mind, the glitch in the digital photograph is ontologically removed from the glitch in earlier photography, thus requiring an alternative critical vocabulary. Mia Fineman, 'Phoning it In', in Alexandra Moschovi, Carol McKay and Arabella Plouviez eds., *The Versatile Image: Photography, Digital Technologies and the Internet* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 248-252.

[68] Jodi Dean, 'Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics', *Cultural Politics,* vol. 1, iss. 1 (2005), 63.

[69] McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 42.

*détournement* and nearly everyone is a situationist lying in wait.[70] In this scenario, everything becomes political and politics is made banal, unthreatening and meaningless.

By contrast, I want to argue that what Ruff's *Jpeg* series shows us is that the glitchy, degraded 'poor' image is always there, right at the heart of our visual culture - perhaps representing the deepest secret of the commodity within contemporary capitalism. The degradation, or compression, of the image is entirely in tune with the systematic impoverishment that capital itself performs. All commodities are in a similar sense compressed: whittled down and concentrated, generating interest and desire though spare, shoddy and expendable means. Indeed, Robert Capps argues, in *Wired* magazine, that the main philosophy of twenty-first century consumer technology 'favor[s] flexibility over high fidelity, convenience over features, quick and dirty over slow and polished'.[71] 'Cheap and simple', Capps makes clear, is 'just fine' for contemporary consumers.[72] Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman writes, in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), that 'it is now the smaller, the lighter, the more portable that signifies improvement and "progress". Travelling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity – that is, for their heavyweight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance – is now the asset of power'.[73] Bauman goes on to assert that 'it is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today – not the durability and lasting reliability of the product'.[74] Therefore, 'poorness' is not in opposition to 'spectacle' or the commodity. By contrast, it is the essence of spectacle and commodification in what Bauman refers to as our 'liquid modernity'.

At this point I want to bring to light what is at stake with the *Jpegs* by considering a comparison with the work of Pop artist Andy Warhol. At first sight there might seem many similarities; for instance, like Ruff, Warhol used commercial

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[70] See Uncredited author, 'BitTorrent: The "one third of all Internet traffic" Myth', *Torrent Freak* (September 2006), https://torrentfreak.com/bittorrent-the-one-third-of-all-internet-traffic-myth/, accessed 11/11/15.
[71] Robert Capps, 'The Good Enough Revolution: When Cheap and Simple is Just Fine', *Wired* (August 2009), http://www.wired.com/2009/08/ff-goodenough/, accessed 11/11/15.
[72] Capps, 'The Good Enough Revolution: When Cheap and Simple is Just Fine', http://www.wired.com/2009/08/ff-goodenough/, accessed 11/11/15.
[73] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 13.
[74] Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 14.

equipment in a manner that generated seemingly 'poor' versions of mass media imagery. And both artists notably appropriated archival imagery featuring scenes of disaster: Warhol took his material for the *Death and Disaster* series (1962 – 1964) from the United Press International news agency and Ruff simply used the World Wide Web for his *Jpeg* series. Indeed, this correspondence is something frequently commented upon in the critical writing about Ruff, which often portrays the German photographer as an inheritor of Warhol's brand of Pop art. This is perhaps most strongly evident in his deadpan passport-style series *Portraits*, which resembles Warhol's own experimentation with photo-booth photography and use of portraiture in his *Screen Tests* (1964 - 66). In point of fact, the basic set of formal rules employed in the *Screen Tests* - static camera, plain background, centred and evenly lit subject - might equally be applied to Ruff's *Portraits*.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has suggested that Ruff presents us with a 'world with no memory, a world with no history, a world with no stereoscopic vision; a flat, dull universe'.[75] In this sense, Daniel Birnbaum argues, 'no one else, it seems, makes art that is so obviously of our times'.[76] Like Warhol, Ruff's representation of the world is deemed so accurate because his photographic gaze seems so indifferent and resolutely machine-like. What is more, Ruff's persona in interviews recalls Warhol's notoriously glib form of self-presentation. 'If things are the way they are', Ruff is quoted, 'why should I try to make them look different'.[77] In a conversation with Régis Durand, Ruff is asked what 'realism' means to him. He responds: 'letting the machine do the work it would do anyway'.[78] This clearly mirrors Warhol's, oft-repeated, phrase made in interview with Gene Swensen in 1963, that 'everybody should be a machine'.[79] It is also reminiscent of the Pop artist's claim to *Time* magazine that: 'Paintings are too hard. The things I want to show are mechanical.

[75] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream', in Christov-Bakargiev ed., *Thomas Ruff* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2009), 19.
[76] Daniel Birnbaum, 'In the Future there will be no Past. Notes on the Work of Thomas Ruff', in Christov-Bakargiev ed., Thomas Ruff (Milan: Skira Editore, 2009), 59.
[77] Ruff quoted in Matthias Winzen, 'A Credible Invention of Reality', in Matthias Winzen ed., *Thomas Ruff 1979 to the Present* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2003), 142.
[78] Ruff quoted in Régis Durand, *Thomas Ruff* (Paris: Centre National de la Photographie, 1997), 18.
[79] Warhol quoted in Gene Swensen, 'What Is Pop Art?', in Kenneth Goldsmith ed., *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews, 1962 – 1987* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004), 18.

Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?'[80] In this regard, Durand deems Ruff an 'heir to Warhol, dreaming like him of seeing mechanically'.[81]

This sort of 'machine vision' is inscribed in much of Warhol's artistic processes, not least in the serial character of his work: prints, photographs and films are repeated, over and over, with little to distinguish one from the other. Warhol mimed the aesthetics of industrialised consumerism, claiming to 'like things exactly the same over and over again'.[82] These aesthetic strategies (which were realised through the use of commercial reproduction technologies such as the silk-screen press) are ever-present in Ruff. He works in large series (the influence of the serial work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, his tutors at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, is also important here) emphasising the generic aspect of his subjects rather than the distinctive.[83] The aforementioned embrace of large format printing also linked his practice to commercial billboard photography. Gronert, for instance, explains that Ruff worked in dimensions 'which had previously been reserved for the consumer industry'.[84] However, there are important differences between Warhol and Ruff, which can be brought to light by considering some of the most famous critical arguments for Warhol (which typically focus on his work from the early '60s). Both Hal Foster and Thomas Crow offer variations on the aforementioned avant-garde valorisation of 'poor' images from slightly different theoretical starting points, applying them to Warhol's work. Foster provides a psychoanalytic reading of Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, within which he interprets their marks of degradation as traumatic. And in Crowe's writing on the *Marilyn Diptych* (1962), the messed-up print quality is understood as a conscious process of mourning the actor's death. The marks of degradation in Ruff, by contrast, have an entirely different affective register.

In an argument that appears in the eponymous essay in *The Return of the Real*

[80] Warhol quoted in David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 140.
[81] Durand, *Thomas Ruff,* 18.
[82] Warhol quoted in Kynaston McShine, *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 457.
[83] For instance, discussing his *Portraits* series of individuals in a passport-style, Ruff stated that: 'An individual portrait is especially suited to showing that a photographed face can have something very general, very anonymous about it'. Ruff quoted in Winzen, 'A Credible Invention of Reality', 142.
[84] Gronert, *The Dusseldorf School of Photography*, 43.

(1996) and that is recycled in his more recent book *The First Pop Age* (2012), Foster comments upon Warhol's tendency to repeat imagery over and over again. For instance, citing Warhol's *Two Hundred Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), he identifies the abstraction that sometimes results from the repetitious printed motif: 'Repetition in Warhol often either produces a sameness or releases a difference…[B]oth', he writes, 'can be corrosive of the identity of the image…Sometimes, too, the effect is to obscure the image, literally, as the silk-screen ink thins with repeated use of the screen or blots with uneven application on the canvas'.[85] And whilst commenting on a particular version of Warhol's *Ambulance Disaster* (1963), Foster describes a large and intrusive smear of ink that covers a corpse's face as a Barthesian *punctum* – something that pierces through the image, affectively connecting, or cathecting, with the viewer (fig. 3.8). This is not directly the result of *Ambulance Disaster's* content, a gruesome press photograph of a fatal ambulance crash. Instead, for Foster, its affective charge is the result of its repetition and incidental degradation, the combination of the grisly appropriated image and the accidental 'floating flashes of the silkscreen process'.[86] The image is reformatted and, Foster writes, 'several contradictory effects can occur at the same time: a warding off of traumatic significance and an opening to it, a defending against traumatic affect and a producing of it'.[87] The 'poorness' of the image weakens its mediatized spectacle of death and disaster, or, in other cases, the spectacle of mass consumption, liberating these objects and images from instrumental reason and opening up points of cathexis with the spectator. This poverty of the image is similarly important to Crow's remarks on Warhol's silkscreens in his essay 'Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol' (1987). For Crow, Warhol's 'early' work (which, in his argument, encompasses the *Death and Disaster* series and Marilyn Monroe portraits) expresses 'a fascination with moments where the brutal fact of death and suffering cancels the possibility of passive and complacent consumption'.[88] Like Foster, Crow, it seems, is affected - or 'pricked' - by a *punctum* in the image. In particular Crow focuses on the *Marilyn Diptych* (1962), which juxtaposes pristine colour portraits of

[85] Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 131.
[86] Foster, *The First Pop Age,* 115.
[87] Foster, *The First Pop Age*, 113.
[88] Crow, 'Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol', 58.

Monroe with scuffed-up (some over-inked and some under-inked) black and white versions of the same image, and suggests that Warhol's repetitive printing and reprinting symbolizes an act of mourning or memorial for the actor's life and death (fig. 3.9). The imprecise black and white inked images of the actor references the 'flickering passage of film exposures' in which she is best remembered, 'not one of which is ever wholly present to perception'.[89] Therefore, Monroe 'is most present where her image is least permanent'.[90]

Whilst Foster and Crow construct a traumatic and melancholic interpretation of Warholian repetition, we might, by contrast, propose a more dialectical reading based around the same formal features, following Slavoj Žižek's account of Deleuzian repetition. In *Organs without Bodies* (2012) Žižek writes that 'the proper Deleuzian paradox is that something truly New can *only* emerge through repetition…What repetition repeats is not the way the past "effectively was" [as with reproduction] but the virtuality inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization'.[91] In this respect, repetition might be said to repeat and release the utopian energy that inheres in the object. Foster describes a traumatic (rather than utopian) release in Warholian repetition. However, to my mind, it is equally possible to argue that a utopian energy inheres and bursts through in Warhol's repetitious images of, for instance, Campbell soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles. Indeed the artist arguably signals a utopian and joyfully democratic aspect of everyday mass-produced consumer items in a glib quote from *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (1975) about Coca-Cola: 'What's great about this country', Warhol declares, 'is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest…A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke…All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good'.[92] Therefore, we might claim that a utopian aspect of mass produced

[89] Crow, 'Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol', 53.
[90] Crow, 'Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol', 53.
[91] Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 11.
[92] The full quote is as follows: 'What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it'. See Andy Warhol,

commodity culture is revealed in Warhol's use of repetition: the hidden virtuality, or transcendent ideal, of Coca-Cola (that it is the same for everyone and that it is always good) emerges. This claim, like Crow's or Foster's, is likewise premised on the observation of some material degradation - smudges and stains - that occur in the print process, since these signal that the image has been repeated.

This reading of Warhol's embrace of commodification in its full dialectical ambivalence, both traumatic and utopian, would understand Warhol as a forerunner to Ruff, more than can be captured by any solely traumatic reading of the deployment of the 'poor' or degraded image. Indeed turning back to Ruff's series, we can make a direct link with Warhol on the issue of poorness: both sets of practice create 'poor' versions of mass media imagery via a form of repetition that alters the image (Warhol's prints are deliberately *over*-inked and Ruff's are deliberately *over*-compressed). As we have discussed, Ruff's repetition of the appropriated image in this body of work compresses and recomposes the image as a grid of murky colour swatches. This process of extreme compression is one that creates a 'lossy' version of the source image, where continuous tone is broken down into what are known as 'blocking artifacts'. What interests me is the aesthetic outcome of such extreme compression, which often results in opaque abstract marks. These might be compared to the smears, stains and 'floating flashes' in Warhol: for instance, to paraphrase Foster, the 'obscene stain' in *Ambulance Disaster* that takes the form of a large inky streak pulling a smear of colour over the corpse's face. And yet, the 'obscene stains' in Ruff are importantly different and, I want to argue, call for an entirely different critical response. With Warhol the damage to the image looks accidental, whereas with Ruff it is consistent, automatic and ordered. The damage is a structural part of the image. Fig. 3.10 displays a close up detail of Ruff's *jpeg bb03*: an appropriated image of the 'Shock and Awe' initial bombing of Baghdad in 2003, which is shown in full in fig. 3.11. Rather than revealing, as with Warhol, something that pierces the surface of the image or which torments us with concealed details (things that we know to lie beneath its smear of ink), we only reveal a more crystalline, ordered and hard-edged surface – an opaque desert of bluey black. Here we have a level of the

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*The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (London; New York: Penguin, 2007), 100 – 101.

image beyond which we cannot go, and where hermeneutics can't take place. Commenting on this element of the *Jpegs'* aesthetic, Rachel Wells notes that 'it draws attention to a sense of denied understanding, of something obscured….an awareness of a barrier or limitation to the image'.[93] For McLuhan, the fuzzy gridded moiré pattern of the television image was a source of libidinal investment, and for Foster the accidental smearing of an image forced through a silk-screen press cathected the object with traumatic energy. By contrast, Ruff's compression of imagery seems to lead to a sense of complete disaffection: focusing on a barrier, limitation or inherent blankness that exists at the heart of the digital image.

As with my earlier comparison between Polke and Warhol, what I want to achieve here is a characterisation both of what is different about our present moment, compared to the '60s, whilst also suggesting threads in '60s culture that can be seen to lead here – this amounts to an alternative genealogy for contemporary cultural strategies. For instance, rather than appropriating from the '60s familiar concepts of trauma, criticality etc., we can identify with Ruff an inheritance of Warhol's interest in the ambivalence of the object, which is both traumatic and utopian. In this sense, their work is not fully grasped by forms of reception, such as that of Foster and Crow, which comprehend it in terms of a traditionally avant-garde model of artistic production.

This aspect of the digital photograph revealed in Ruff's *Jpegs* can be seen to invert the main plot point of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966), where the protagonist discovers more information than immediately meets the eye, when he 'blows up' and magnifies a photographic negative, inadvertently uncovering evidence of a murder. Regarding this feature of analogue photography, W.J.T. Mitchell explains that 'there is an indefinite amount of information in a continuous-tone photograph, so enlargement usually reveals more detail but yields a fuzzier and grainier picture'.[94] Walter Benjamin also discusses photographic close-ups and enlargements (focussing on the close-up botanical photography of Karl Blossfeldt) in his 'Little History of Photography' (1931). For Benjamin, these techniques (as with

[93] Rachel Wells, 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', in Alexandra Moschovi, Carol McKay and Arabella Plouviez eds., *The Versatile Image: Photography, Digital Technologies and the Internet* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 211.
[94] Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era,* 6.

the use of slow-motion in the moving image) reveal a 'secret': we 'discover the existence of…[the] optical unconscious'.[95] The nascent technology of photography is understood to provide us with access to a never before seen realm of minute detail and slowed down time. Esther Leslie summarises Benjamin's idea of the 'optical unconscious' as a playful and harmonious relationship between humanity and machinery: 'A "new region of consciousness" is summoned…contracted only in conjunction with technology', she writes, 'enlargements, emphases of miniature details, the focus on banal, everyday milieus…not only renders more precise what was already visible but unclear: it divulges wholly new structural formations in the material'.[96] The camera is like a tool that both simulates the visual organ and extends its perceptual reach. By contrast, 'a digital image', Mitchell writes, 'contains a fixed amount of information...Once…[it] is enlarged to the point where its gridded microstructure becomes visible, further enlargement will reveal nothing new'.[97] The camera in this context does not work like a tool or prosthesis that enhances perception. Instead, it seems to work on a different basis, inverting the relationship between human and technology, because we always inevitably come up against a wall of pixels that divulges nothing to us. We might suggest that this ruins the imaginative possibilities of an 'optical unconscious'.

Benajmin's 'Little History of Photography' also references Brecht's description (in a famous passage of 'The Threepenny Lawsuit') of a photograph of 'the Krupp works [the original factory in the Krupp steel, armaments and shipbuilding empire] or the AEG'.[98] A photograph of these institutions, Brecht argues, 'tells us next to nothing'.[99] He uses this example in order to claim that, such has become the reification of human relations, 'less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality'.[100] This claim can equally be put upon the magnified jpeg, which shares more with Brecht's understanding of photography than with

[95] Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, *Volume 2, Part 2*, *1931-1934* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 511-512.
[96] Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London; New York: Verso, 2002), 105.
[97] Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era,* 6.
[98] Brecht quoted in Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', 526.
[99] Brecht quoted in Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', 526.
[100] Brecht quoted in Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', 526.

Benjamin's playful understanding of photographic magnification and the 'optical unconscious'. Brecht's thoughts on photography can be seen to anticipate the murky and opaque grid that is revealed by Ruff's magnification. Certainly with Ruff, the idea of the photograph telling us 'next to nothing' is revealed when the image is blown up. Indeed this feature is exposed as something embedded within the structure of the image. This, perhaps, is the 'secret' of the digital photograph's 'optical unconscious'. The glitch, stain, smear or floating flash is already there in the image. It is not something added by the artist, as in Foster's discussion of Warhol, in order to signal the 'cracks' in the capitalist system or the 'trauma' of industrialised consumption. It is only the shoddy surface value of this type of image: the truth of depletion at the heart of the commodity. Foster argued that Warhol's repetitious print process charged, or re-cathected, the appropriated disaster imagery with affective energy. However, I want to argue the opposite with Ruff, whose imagery, nonetheless, is comparably disastrous.

Ruff explains in an interview with Max Dax, that 'in terms of content, the *jpegs* series consists of images that have been seared into the collective memory…images of the world that are unforgettable'.[101] Accordingly, the series includes compressed images of the 9/11 attack, the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, the U.S 'Shock and Awe' campaign, nuclear bomb testing on Bikini Atoll, the 'killing fields' of Cambodia, scenes of warfare in Beirut and Grozny, as well as more apparently innocuous landscapes and tourist 'hotspots'. The treatment of these diverse, eventful and historically significant images, however, renders them uniform. Each photograph is subjected to the same level of compression and is 'blown-up' to a similar scale so that they are equally pixelated. This appears to make each image equivalent to one another. They appear as alternative configurations of the same coloured grid. They no longer seem singular or eventful. Instead, each appears as uninteresting and generic as any other. The titles of individual works in the series encourage this response. They resemble indiscriminate filenames, the type that often appear automatically on a computer database, which don't speak to the nature of the photograph's content. They simply include some abbreviated detail of the location of

[101] Thomas Ruff in Max Dax, 'Interview with Thomas Ruff', in Christov-Bakargiev ed., *Thomas Ruff* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2009), 74.

whatever is depicted. For instance, a photograph of smoke billowing from the site of the twin towers is titled *jpeg ny14*, a photograph of some woods is titled *jpeg wd02* ('wd02' simply because this is the second picture of some woods in the series), and a photograph of a bombed out Grozny is titled *jpeg gr01*.

Nevertheless, in Rachel Wells's analysis of the series in her essay 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', she argues that Ruff's artistic process has an important ethical aspect. This is premised on Judith Butler's claim, in 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography' (2007), 'that visual culture in a time of war should demonstrate the unseen within our seeing'.[102] This is because war, Butler argues, tends to numb the senses, decimating 'our capacity to feel outrage in the face of human suffering'.[103] Referring in particular to the notorious Abu Ghraib photographs (blatant evidence of this numbing of the senses), Butler writes that 'this "not seeing" in the midst of seeing, this not-seeing that is the condition of seeing, has become the visual norm…one that we read in the photographic frame as it conducts this fateful disavowal'.[104] In this sense, a visual culture that 'teaches us to see the frame of what we see', is crucial.[105] For Wells, the opaque grid of pixels in the *Jpeg* series stands in for this idea of the unseen within the frame of our vision: 'we are shown the blunt finiteness of the image'.[106] Discussing the stakes of Ruff's limited and 'lacking' images of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, she suggests that 'only by becoming resolved to their own distance and limitation in their attempts to comprehend the horror of 9/11 can those who were not directly affected come closer, and see more clearly'.[107] Leaning on Butler, she argues that 'Ruff's jpeg images of war highlight [our] "quotidian acceptance [of war]"', and highlight the necessity to 'break apart and fragment a recognized, learned response from the media's model of images' in order to try to understand a larger 'horror and

[102] Judith Butler quoted in Wells, 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', 212.
[103] Judith Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space.* vol. 25, no. 6 (April 2007), 956.
[104] Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', 956.
[105] Butler quoted in Wells, 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', 212.
[106] Wells, 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', 212-213.
[107] Wells, 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', 212.

outrage'.[108]

However, to my mind, there is a disproportion between the photographs and Wells's argument about comprehending the horror of the event depicted. Simply put, the *Jpegs* are too big. To a certain extent, the scale of these photographic objects is at odds with Wells's ethical program - their large format overwhelms the image's historical specificity. The compression of the image means that the content, whilst being visible (for instance, billowing smoke and buildings in rubble are identifiable in the *Jpegs* of 9/11), is not foregrounded. Instead, we focus on the generic effects of pixelation. It is the limit of what we can see in the digital image that we see. In this sense, the subject matter in Ruff's appropriated photographs seems incidental. Their compression and concurrent enlargement dispossess us of the ability to respond to the image as Wells would have it (the fact that the images appropriated by Ruff are already well-known through incessant circulation in the media also dampens their effect). Indeed the image's formatting as a blown-up jpeg seems to dispossess us of any judgement at all, because the photograph mostly shows us the standardized structure of the image. Roland Barthes said once of an exhibition of 'Shock-Photos' that 'the photographer has left us nothing'.[109] In his case, the judgement arose from his view that the photographers showed too much and that the photograph's so-called 'shock' was over-indicated. This leaves the viewer no mystery to decipher, no work to do. In the *Jpegs,* however for perhaps the opposite reason, the photograph has similarly left us without anything to decipher. Their pixelated representation decomposes the event, leaving a grid of blank pixels: the lack of information rendering the image predominately decorative. Perhaps this is why these large format photographs of death and disaster function, at least according to fig. 3.12 and fig. 3.13, so effectively as anodyne office and foyer decoration: the 'shock photo' here easily assimilated as corporate ornament.

Nevertheless despite the blandness of the *Jpegs*, I want to argue that there is a horrifying dimension to Ruff's photographs, going beyond their apparently anodyne surfaces. But contra Wells, I don't see this horror as located in their subject matter: instead I want to argue that it is in the structure of the digital image. These

[108] Wells, 'Digital Scale: Enlargement and Intelligibility in Thomas Ruff's JPEG Series', 213.
[109] Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* [1979], tr. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 1997), 71.

photographs picture the fact that, with the jpeg, the closer we look, the less we get to see. We are confronted with a level of the image that, I think, can be constructively defined as an 'aphotic zone'. This is a phrase normally used to describe the depth of an ocean beyond which there is no light and where photosynthesis can't take place. In the aphotic zone of the ocean the water is pitch black and extends to the ocean floor. There is very little life. Likewise within the *Jpeg* series: the image is magnified to its limit of resolution, to a point where its visual information just gives out. And, as in the aphotic zone, we arrive at a point where we simply can't see anything. The aphotic zone describes the horror of digital photography: it is the opaque mark of all that is excluded by the digitization of the image (fig. 3.14).

### horror

In his early essay 'Photography' (1927), Siegfried Kracauer observes, presciently, that 'the world has become a photographable present, and [that] the photographable present has been entirely eternalised'.[110] He refers to a 'blizzard of photographs'; conjuring an image of a world in which photographs cover and cocoon everything like snow. This 'blizzard', he writes, changes our relationship to the image. It 'betrays an indifference to what the [photographed] things mean'.[111] We can understand the 'blizzard of photographs' as having a whitewash effect, appearing to make individual photographs equivalent, interchangeable and individually not very interesting. Kracauer made these comments in the 1920s on the basis of increasingly popular illustrated magazines, a time that seems utterly incommensurable with what we might see as our current 'photographable present'. For instance, research published in 2014 by Mylio (an online photo organization and storage service) estimates that in 2015 one trillion photographs will be taken and that by 2017 there will be 4.9 trillion photographs in storage. It also claims that if these photographs in storage were printed out, in the normal four by six inch print format, they would stretch far enough to make 2.5 roundtrips to the sun: less a 'blizzard of photographs',

[110] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography' [1927], *Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, tr. Thomas Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 59.
[111] Kracauer, 'Photography', 58.

more an extra-terrestrial behemoth.[112]

More recently Franco Berardi has highlighted the impact of this explosion of photographic information from a perspective similar to that of Kracauer. Like Kracauer, he focuses on the displacement of historical memory by the immediate present, or 'the photographable present'. Echoing Kracauer, Berardi asks: 'what happens to memory when the flow of information explodes, expands enormously, besieges perception, occupies the whole of available mental time, accelerates and reduces the mind's time of exposure to the single informational impression?'[113] Now, Berardi suggests, the 'things that an individual remembers (images, etc.) work towards the construction of an impersonal memory, homogenized, uniformly assimilated and thinly elaborated'.[114] For Berardi, this extreme mass of images - an incredible intensification of Kracauer's 'photographable present' - puts the individual in a state of constant excitement without the possibility of climactic release. We are confronted by innumerable images, but none of them 'prick' us as Barthes famously said of the *punctum*. Rather than engage with or be affected by an individual image, we would prefer to see more and more of the images in the vast online database. Berardi writes:

> if, into the circle of excitement, we introduce an inorganic element such as electronics and impose an acceleration of stimuli and a contraction of psychophysical reaction times, something ends up changing in the organism and its forms of erotic reaction. Orgasm is replaced by a series of excitations without release. Orgasm is no longer the prelude to any accomplishment. Inconclusive excitation takes the place of orgasmic release.[115]

For Berardi, this psychopathology is a symptom of the mass of imagery and stimuli in the current media sphere. Our desire for the electronic, 'lossy' and massively reproducible digital image signals a libidinal disinvestment: providing only the possibility of inconclusive excitation, hindering, perhaps, the Barthesian *punctum* (as that point of contact between the spectator and photograph is never fully

[112] Paul Worthington, 'One Trillion Photos in 2015', *Mylio* (December 2014), http://mylio.com/one-trillion-photos-in-2015/, accessed 28/10/15.
[113] Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation* (London; New York: Minor Compositions, 2009), 88.
[114] Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation,* 89.
[115] Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation,* 90.

accomplished).

Ruff's *Jpegs* contribute to this understanding of our 'photographable present'. However, by picturing - and emphasising, blowing-up and framing - what I have called the aphotic zone in the digital photograph, Ruff draws our focus away from formulaic suppositions that are based on the abundance of imagery in the media sphere, and which, as we have seen, have been a continuous theme for theorists of technically reproduced photography. With the aphotic zone, by contrast, Ruff focusses on what is aesthetically new in the digital photograph: namely, the hollowness, or inaccessibility, that exists at the core of the image. These muddy blocks seem precisely linked to the psychopathological condition discussed by Berardi – they are impersonal and homogenized. The aphotic zone indicates a blankness right at the heart of the photograph and, in doing so, precludes the imaginative possibilities of an optical unconscious because a viewer always comes up against the dull finiteness of the image. Certainly this medium cannot be understood according to the libidinal categories proposed by McLuhan: unlike the TV's open-mesh stocking-like image there is nothing to tease and for the eye to fill in and complete. The jpeg is complete, signalled by the irreducibility of its grid of pixels. This produces something similar to what Robert Pfaller has called, an 'interpassive' relationship to the image, in contradistinction to the idea of the interactive viewing experience, which is typically invoked with 'poor' imagery. 'There are artworks that already contain their own viewing and reception', Robert Pfaller has claimed:

> For interpassive artworks…viewers are not required to participate…The work is there, completely finished – not only completely produced, but completely consumed as well. Contained within such works is not simply the necessary activity, but also the requisite passivity…absolv[ing] viewers of any necessary activity whatsoever, and also of their passivity [because they don't even need to passively view the object]. They can now be even more passive than passive.[116]

Ruff's emphasis on the gridded-up structure of the jpeg seems to indicate an 'interpassive' stage of photography, which absolves the viewer of any activity whatsoever. The scenes depicted in the *Jpegs* appear simply as variable distributions

[116] Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*, tr. Lisa Rosenblatt (London; New York: Verso, 2014), Kindle edition.

around a norm: that norm being a DCT eight by eight grid of segmented colour.

It is at this point that I want to return to Stallabrass's idea of the 'data sublime', which he proposes represents a broad tendency in contemporary art photography (encompassing Ruff's large-scale work). This style of photography, he argues, tends to confront 'the viewer with the impression and spectacle of a chaotically complex and immensely large configuration of data'.[117] He argues that these 'awesome' displays function 'much as renditions of mountain scenes and stormy seas did on nineteenth-century urban viewers. They overwhelm the viewer with an ocean of data that they cannot make sense of…[and] abandon the viewer in a wilderness of information'.[118] Indeed the compressed aesthetic identifiable in the *Jpeg* series would seem to represent a precise depiction of a 'data sublime' (that is if we take the word 'data' in its normal usage, meaning transmittable and storable computer information). This is because they, quite literally, make a spectacle of data: the jpeg simply representing, as Ruff explains, 'a purely technical solution [for image compression] that has nothing to do with aesthetics'.[119]

The 'data sublime' is invoked by Stallabrass in order to denounce this type of spectacular photography. Stallabrass focuses on the stupefying aspect of the sublime, which we can perhaps link to Freud's remarks on the 'oceanic'; an affective response to an object that plunges the viewer into a strangely narcissistic reverie.[120] This is achieved, Stallabrass writes, through purely technical means, for instance, 'greater resolution and bit depth', and at the expense of 'subjective, creative choice'.[121] As a result, he charges the 'data sublime' with:

> a transparent complicity with commercialized spectacle. There is a link, in other words, between the presentation of these subjects as mere image and the familiar powerlessness of people in day-to-day democracy, of image and news

[117] Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', 82.
[118] Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', 83.
[119] Ruff in Dax, 'Interview with Thomas Ruff', *Thomas Ruff* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2009), 74.
[120] The 'oceanic' refers to a sensation of limitlessness resulting from the perceived absence of perceptible boundaries - like an ocean. In his writing about this 'feeling', Freud argues that it represents a fragment of infantile consciousness; a time before the infant can 'distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him'. It is a feeling associated with a time before the infant was aware of other people in the world: thus, a very narcissistic form of elation. In this respect, an 'oceanic' feeling represents a complete disinvestment in the actual or historical content of the object. Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents* [1930], tr. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1963), 13-14.
[121] Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', 89.

> management, of the hollowing out of citizenship in favor of consumerism, of broadcast and celebrity culture. This strand's relentless focus on the fixed image is a reflection of the marked decline in political agency, in democratic participation, which is a steadily growing and universal feature of neoliberal societies.[122]

Stallabrass bemoans the work of art that displays complicity with commercialized spectacle, instead of working to reinstate a subject with a political and social conscience and sense of purposeful agency. However this approach to the artwork is arguably too prescriptive: heroising an idea of a 'powerful' subject and disavowing new cultural forms that don't adhere to an avant-garde model. It precludes the appreciation of any deeper complexity in works such as Ruff's *Jpegs,* which might be said to offer insight into contemporary technological conditions. Adorno wrote, in *Aesthetic Theory*, that 'even the most sublime artwork takes up a determinate attitude to empirical reality by stepping outside of the constraining spell it casts, not once and for all, but rather ever and again, concretely, unconsciously polemical toward this spell at each historical moment'.[123] Thus the work that is sublime is not fixed as such. It wavers and even steps outside of its own spell, so that even on the most intense site of spectacularization or sublimity, dialectical thinking can occur. This means that we are not always under the spell of the sublime: we can also see something as sublime. Whilst this might seem like a slender difference, it means that we can interpret Ruff's *Jpeg* photographs as picturing our technological condition as sublime: suggesting that nature's capacity to overwhelm, awe and astound us is now invoked by technology or objects of 'second nature'.

The Kantian sublime, which is appealed to in Stallabrass's discussion of 'mountain scenes' and 'stormy seas', is based on an observer's experience of natural objects of infinite magnitude or awesome power. The sublime is a metaphorical response in the viewer by which they transform, provided they are safe and not 'afraid', such immense scenes - Kant cites, for instance, thunderclouds, volcanoes, hurricanes, high waterfalls, and the 'boundless' ocean - into images of their own

[122] Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', 89.
[123] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), 5.

power, a 'nonsensible' sense of 'superiority over nature itself in its immensity'.[124] A feeling of 'astonishment that borders on terror', 'awe', 'dread' and physical inferiority is resolved and the viewer experiences a feeling of 'inspiriting satisfaction'.[125] Stallabrass attacks the supposed instrumentalistion of this process in contemporary art photography because it lures the viewer into a system of false consciousness. This feeling of 'inspiriting satisfaction' only increases and disguises the distance between the viewer and the object, which is emblematic of the distance between the individual and political processes in neoliberal society. However, this does not encapsulate the process by which we experience Ruff's large format digital photography. In my own experience of Ruff's 'data sublime' there is no inspiriting and positive resolution of the object that asserts a feeling of self-superiority in the subject, nor are such responses commonly reported by others in the literature on the work. Instead, the *Jpegs* reveal the finite limit of vision with digital imagery: an aphotic zone forcing us to confront the depressing truth of our technological apparatuses. Namely, that they no longer function as a tool or prosthesis, they don't improve our perceptual capabilities, but instead function according to a logic that is hidden from us.

In this respect, I want to argue that Stallabrass sells Ruff, and indeed this type of photography, short. Ruff's *Jpegs* have an effect that is not imagined by, or that exceeds the terms or imaginative horizons of Stallabrass's account. Rather, I want to argue, they put us in touch with what I want to call the horror of digital photography. Indeed the sublime invoked in this type of photography is radically different to the Kantian sublime and its inspiriting overcoming of 'crude nature'. By contrast, it

[124] Kant asks us, in *Critique of Judgement*, to 'consider bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place. And we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence'. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 120.

[125] This feeling of inspiriting satisfaction, Kant writes, 'raise[s] the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature'. Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* 101 -102.

seems more related to what Sianne Ngai has recently called the 'stuplime': a neologism collapsing the 'stupid' and the 'sublime' that speaks to the aesthetic experience of mass accumulations of information or data.[126] Whilst the scale of these accumulations induces a sense of astonishment, the accumulation of data puts strain on the viewers' capacity to metabolize the information: it exhausts rather than astounds them. Indeed we might say that this 'stuplime' feeling of disaffection is the only available means by which we can engage with photographs now, since they have accumulated around us exponentially and routinized our behaviour to the extent that we seem to have become a function of the camera, or now, more precisely, the camera phone. Whilst this is an effect of all digital photography, it is something that Ruff's *Jpeg* series brings to heightened visibility because of the focus put upon the aphotic zone of the digital photograph.

A central motif of the horror genre is the idea of confronting a limit to our ability to understand something. In horror, as Eugene Thacker suggests (mentioning the supernatural literary horror of H.P. Lovecraft), 'you find a fundamental question about the fabric of reality and the impossibility of ever fully knowing or comprehending it…horror moves away from human-centric concerns…and towards a view of a world that is either against the human, or in many cases indifferent to the human'.[127] It is in these terms that we can understand the aphotic zone in the *Jpegs*: when we come up against, to use Thacker's phrase, a world 'that is not-for-us'. The grid of pixels is the boundary or interface to a 'world-without-us'.[128] The experience of a 'world-without-us' in horror represents 'the subtraction of the human from the world…[,] a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific'.[129] In this respect, Ruff can be seen in dialogue with Flusser, who appealed for an 'informative photography' that would 'reveal the fact that there is no place for human freedom

[126] Ngai is here specifically discussing certain literary and artistic works that foreground this affect. For instance, Ngai suggests that Gerhard Richter's exhaustive accrual of photographs in his *Atlas* project, Gertrude Stein's literary taxonomy of human types in *The Making of Americans* and On Kawara's bureaucratic cataloguing of dates from 998031 B.C. to 1969 A.D in *One Million Years (Past)* are all emblematic of the 'stuplime'. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 248 – 297.
[127] Eugene Thacker quoted in 'The Sight of a Mangled Corpse: An Interview with Eugene Thacker', *Scapegoat*, Summer/Autumn 2013, Issue 5, 379.
[128] Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Winchester; Washington: Zero Books, 2011), Kindle edition.
[129] Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1,* Kindle edition.

within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses [such as photography]'.[130] The photographic image 'must not lead to the fetishizing compensation of lost objects by their symbolic replacement', Hubertus von Amelunxen glosses, putting stress on Flusser's belief that we must give up any illusion of recovering a pre-photographic and pre-technological world.[131] Instead 'it must…educate us into an awareness of this translation within the image'.[132] It is only in revealing this horror that a philosophy of photography, Flusser writes, might 'finally…show a way in which it is nevertheless possible to open up a space for freedom'.[133]

Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* was originally published in 1983, before the emergence of the digital image (therefore the 'photograph' in this context still refers to the capture of light and other rays onto sensitive surfaces via chemical and mechanical devices). In this book he argues that photography is emblematic of a post-industrial and fully apparatized world.[134] This is because the photograph is a 'technical image' – an image produced by apparatuses. 'As apparatuses themselves are the products of applied scientific texts', Flusser explains, 'in the case of technical images one is dealing with the indirect products of scientific texts. This gives them, historically and ontologically, a position that is different from that of traditional images'.[135] Flusser's strict interpretation of photography as an apparatized practice, and thus 'technical', can be seen to lay important groundwork for thinking about digital photography, within which the photographic image's relationship with the apparatus becomes ever tighter, because the light admitted by the camera's lens is automatically digitized and made 'lossy' by the camera apparatus: this is the horror pictured in Ruff's *Jpegs*.

Flusser's concept of photography as an apparatized practice is based on the idea that photographic representation constitutes a variation of the technical categories of

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[130] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 81 – 82.
[131] Hubertus von Amelunxen, 'Afterword' to Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 93- 94.
[132] von Amelunxen, Afterword' to Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 93- 94.
[133] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 81 – 82.
[134] Flusser contrasts apparatuses from the machines of the industrial world. 'Tools and machines work,' he writes, 'by tearing objects from the natural world and informing them, i.e. changing the world. But apparatuses do not work in that sense. Their intention is not to change the world but to change the meaning of the world. Their intention is symbolic'. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 25.
[135] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 14.

the camera, offering little in excess. So the image, in this understanding, is simply a dumb function of its technological support. Whilst this point of view might seem overly deterministic, it appears precisely to describe the digital image as pictured by Ruff. What we see in the *Jpegs* is a gridded system of pixels, not the window onto the world that is sometimes described in traditional thinking about photography.[136] This is why the *Jpegs* come across as banal colour charts rather than documents of historical events. The banality of photography is invoked in Flusser's definition of photographs as 'post-industrial' objects, because they are 'practically worthless supports of information…[that] can be replicated and…elaborated by an automated apparatus'.[137] The photograph itself has no objective significance or purpose other than to register the apparatus's technical capabilities. Therefore the 'act of photography', Flusser argues, merges the photographer and camera 'into one indivisible function…it is post-ideological and programmed, an act for which reality is information, not the significance of this information'.[138] In other words, the photographer has no agency. It is the camera that has agency.

In this respect, Flusser's theorisation of photography relates to the discussion of our contemporary world picture in Chapter One. The world picture that I described there is one in which technology is not used to transform, or 'enframe' nature productively, as in Heidegger's account of the 'Age of the World Picture' and 'The Question concerning Technology'. Instead our world picture is dysphoric, meaning, in part, that we have no useful relationship to the world, rather we have become the object of technology or, put differently, the object now takes precedence over the subject (this was also suggested in Chapter Two, specifically in relation to the

[136] On this tendency for the photograph to be seen as a 'window', Flusser writes that: 'Technical images are difficult to decode, for a strange reason. To all appearances, they do not have to be decoded since their significance is automatically reflected on their surface - just like fingerprints, where the significance (the finger) is the cause and the image (the copy) is the consequence. The world apparently signified in the case of technical images appears to be their cause and they themselves are a final link in a causal chain that connects them without interruption to their significance. The world apparently signified in the case of technical images appears to be their cause and they themselves are a final link in a causal chain that connects them without interruption to their significance… i.e. they appear to be on the same level of reality as their significance. What one sees on them therefore do not appear to be symbols that one has to decode but symptoms of the world through which, even if indirectly, it is to be perceived'. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 14 – 15.

[137] Vilém Flusser, 'The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs', *Leonardo*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1986), 329.

[138] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 39.

functionalization and monetization of our 'free time' online). Technology no longer seems to function as the object of our intentions. This is manifest in contemporary photographic practice, in which the photographer is always operating within the pre-programmed possibilities of the apparatus. And the 'freedom of the photographer', Flusser proposes gloomily, is 'a programmed freedom'.[139] This is the horror translated in the aphotic zone of the digital photograph. The blank pixels represent the boundary between us and the apparatus, which, following Flusser's logic, is a world-without-us: a 'black box' that functions automatically. And because all 'human decisions are made on the basis of the decisions of apparatuses; they have degenerated into purely 'functional' decisions, i.e. human intention has evaporated'.[140]

The horror of photography thus understood is that it functions for the benefit of a photographic apparatus, servicing a feedback mechanism with the 'single aim of maintaining and improving' itself.[141] So whilst the photographer might feel that they are bringing their own criteria – artistic, political, scientific – to bear (so that 'the apparatus functions as a function of the photographer's intention'), this intention, nevertheless, 'functions as a function of the camera's program'.[142] Flusser's notion, in the early 1980s, that the simple act of photography is symptomatic of our functionalisation for inhuman apparatuses might seem overstated in relation to that historical period of analogue photography. However it represents a surprisingly precise diagnosis of photography's current digital condition. The idea of a photographic apparatus whose single aim is to maintain and improve itself is arguably expressed in our use of camera phones (recent research suggests that by 2017 nearly 80% of all photos will be taken using camera phones): recent projections speculate that nearly 1.3 trillion photographs will be taken in 2017.[143] This is indicative of a 16.2% annual compound growth rate in the number of photographs circulating in the public domain. As the photographic apparatuses get more advanced, it seems that we only wall ourselves deeper and deeper into a cocoon of

[139] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 35.
[140] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 73.
[141] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 73 - 74.
[142] Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 35.
[143] Worthington, 'One Trillion Photos in 2015', http://mylio.com/one-trillion-photos-in-2015/, accessed 28/10/15.

'technical images', which serve no purpose beyond that of the apparatus. Indeed, this pessimistic view of photography is reflected in the pressure that photo-sharing Instagram users feel to constantly 'prove their life' by taking and posting photos of anything and everything.[144] Who are they proving their life to? The Instagram program, which coerces our relentless photographic activity to maintain, expand and improve itself.

One of the purported aims of horror is to confront 'the impersonal and indifferent world-without-us'.[145] The genre is directed against the presupposition that the world is always the 'world-for-us'. In doing so it focuses on blind spots, instances when there is a horrible disproportion between the 'world-for-us' and the 'world-in-itself'. 'It makes these blind spots its central concern', Thacker writes, 'expressing them not in abstract concepts but in a whole bestiary of impossible life forms – mists, ooze, blobs, slime, clouds, and muck'.[146] This is, I want to claim, what Ruff does in the *Jpeg* series. In this respect, perhaps we could add the murky form of the aphotic zone, which expresses the blind spots encoded in the digital image, to Thacker's list of bestial 'life forms'. Moreover, it is how Ruff's practice bears out Flusser's desire for an 'informative photography'. This is a photography that does not 'venerate apparatuses and programs' and does not overcompensate for a putative lack in the photographic image. Instead, it works to expose 'the cracks in [photographic] representation, the absurdity of any "post-historical" technical representation', which is absurd because it evidences the absence of photographic agency or intention.[147] This horrible absurdity is a symptom of our functionalisation by photography and it finds expression in the form of an aphotic zone in Ruff's *Jpegs*. And, worse still, this aphotic zone is also expressed, if we look a little closer, in the trillions of photographs that circulate around us on a daily basis.

This returns us, I think, to the Stedelijk's depot in the Gyroscoopweg area on the

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[144] This idea of a pressure to 'prove your life' on Instagram is taken from Essena O'Neill, a teenage Instagram 'star' (reportedly she would receive up to 2000 Australian dollars to post to her 612,000 followers). O'Neill received a lot of publicity in November 2015 after she announced her retirement from the photo sharing platform, stating that the pressure to constantly 'prove her life' had become too much. See Ellie Hunt, 'Essena O'Neill quits Instagram claiming social media "is not real life"', *The Guardian* (November 2015), http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/03/instagram-star-essena-oneill-quits-2d-life-to-reveal-true-story-behind-images, accessed 06/11/15.

[145] Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1,* Kindle edition.

[146] Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1,* Kindle edition.

[147] von Amelunxen, 'Afterword' to Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography,* 94.

outskirts of Amsterdam, where I saw Ruff's *Jpegs* in a refrigeration unit. There was a kind of horror to this experience: a glimpse into the absurd conditions necessitated by the financialisation of art objects in contemporary art museums, whose value is such that they, in general, are not permitted to be seen. Instead, objects like Ruff's *Jpegs* are stored offsite, in out of town business districts, sealed in climate-controlled darkness in order to preserve and protect the museum's expensive assets. Indeed, it seems that the museum is not, as Stallabrass argues, 'devoted to gallery spectacle', but is in fact devoted, at least partly, to the absence of spectacle.[148] Perhaps this is because the truth of the art object is in complete, absurd, disproportion to its monetary value and institutional status: the object's value is purely financial so the material thing is shunned - put away somewhere else, so that it is very difficult for someone to actually see it. Above all, this seems to particularly characterise the state of contemporary art photography, which only achieved recognition within the upper echelons of the art market on the basis of an embarrassing and inane detail: that it could be printed as big as painting. At the Gyroscoopweg this embarrassing detail is safely locked away, along with another embarrassing detail: that these huge photographs are far more fragile than earlier, and much smaller, analogue photographs. When we see these photographs in such fastidious environments they seem dumb and disappointing, a function of a larger apparatus of financial valuation that is increasingly reliant upon 'black box trading' (what is also known as 'algorithmic trading'). A system that operates automatically, indifferently and like Flusser's photographic apparatus, seems to function with the single aim of maintaining and improving itself – another sort of 'world-without-us'.

[148] Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', 89.

**Fig. 3.1** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg ny06*, 2005. Chromogenic C-print, 276 x 185 cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

**Fig. 3.2** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg wd02*, 2005.Chromogenic C-print, 234 x 164 cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

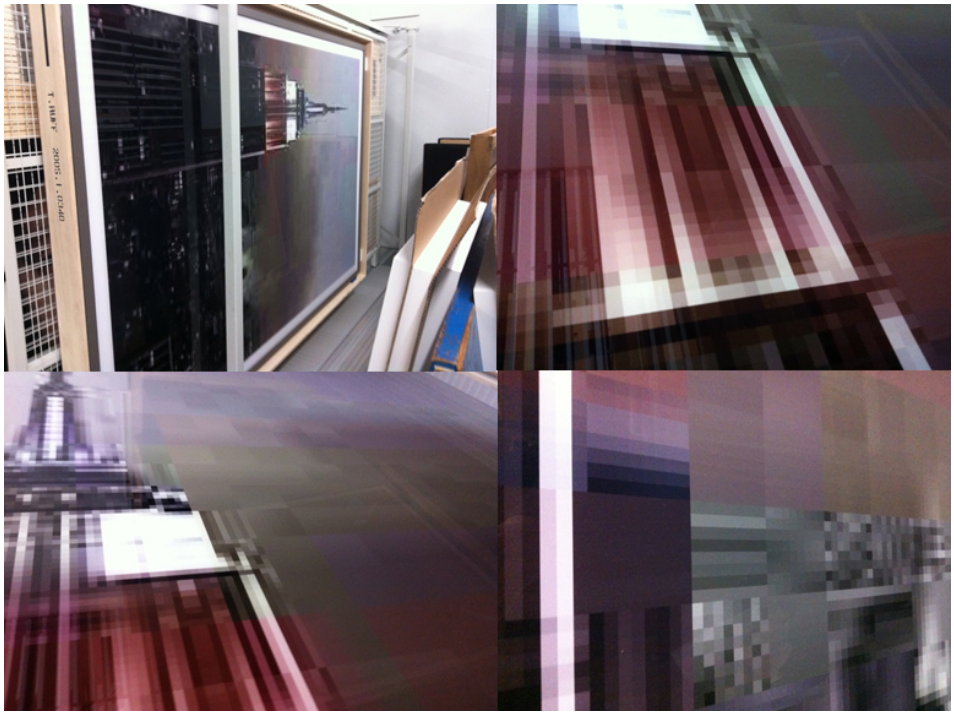

**Fig. 3.3** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg ny06* (details), 2005. Chromogenic C-print, 254.8 x 164 cm. Image taken by author in the depot of the Stedelijk Museum, Gyroscoopweg, Amsterdam.

**Fig. 3.4** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg ny02*, 2004. Chromogenic C-print, 269 x 364 cm.The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**Fig. 3.5** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg nb01*, 2004. Chromogenic C-print, 249 x 188 cm. Private collection.

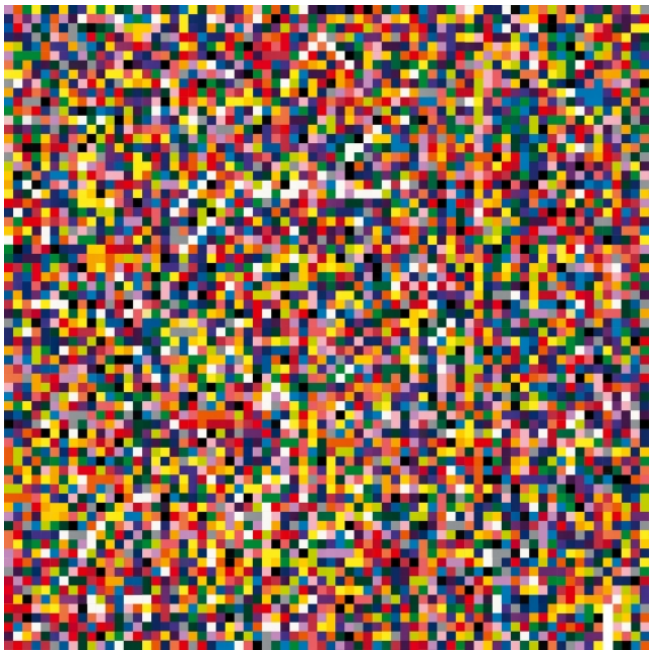

**Fig. 3.6** Gerhard Richter, *4900 colours*, 2007. Lacquer on Alu Dibond, 680 x 680 cm. Private collection.

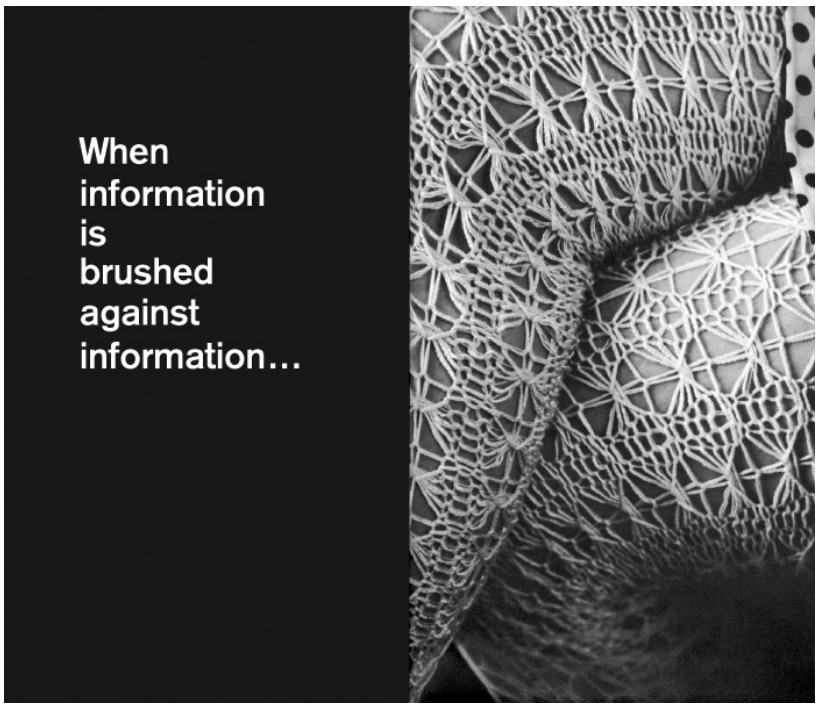


**Fig. 3.7** Illustration from Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*: *An Inventory of Effects* (Berkeley; Hamburg: Gingko Press, 1967).

**Fig. 3.8** Andy Warhol, *Ambulance Disaster* (detail), 1963-1964. Silkscreen ink on paper, 101.6 x 76.2 cm. Private collection.

**Fig. 3.9** Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962. Acrylic paint on canvas, each panel each panel 205.4 x 144.7 cm. Tate London.

**Fig. 3.10** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg bb03* (detail), 2007. Chromogenic C-print, 185.1 x 249.56 cm. Private collection.

**Fig. 3.11** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg bb03*, 2004. Chromogenic C-print, 185.1 x 249.56 cm. Private collection.

**Fig. 3.12** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg ny01*, 2004 (photographed in exhibition 'Thomas Ruff, Prato', 2010, Prato, Italy). Chromogenic C-print, 256 x 188 cm, private collection.

**Fig. 3.13** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg* diptych in the lobby of 980 Madison Ave, New York. Image taken from https://collectordaily.com/thomas-ruff-in-the-lobby-of-980-madison/, accessed 10/04/14.

**Fig. 3.14** Thomas Ruff, *jpeg bb03* (detail), 2004. Chromogenic C-print, 185.1 x 249.56 cm. Private collection.

# Chapter Four

## Dead Montage

> Last summer, I went up to the dia Beacon. And I saw a lot of…minimalist works, a lot of, I guess, great works, if you know, you see these works as…uh massive tributes to art. But actually I think the best piece was this piece by, um, Robert Smithson. He had this pile of sand. OK. And he took this mirror, just one mirror, and he put it right into the pile of the sand. It was just amazing. It was everything and nothing, at once. I think it was the best work I've ever seen in my life…[1]

This text is transcribed from the American contemporary artist Jordan Wolfson's early film *The Crisis* (2004), in which the artist is followed around an austere cathedral with a hand-held camera as he describes his favourite artworks and art-related experiences. The atmosphere is reverential and the tone of his delivery is strange: enthusiastically mock-serious. The artist expresses a pleasure in the artworks that is nonetheless laced with a deadpan cynicism. 'There's one other piece I can think of, which was one of the best pieces I've seen in my life', Wolfson tells us in a hushed voice, 'it was this piece by, uh, Olafur Eliasson. It's this room with this diffused yellow light, like sepia or something. And when you walk into the room, you don't really understand what's happening. And then', Wolfson continues, giddy with enthusiasm as the sound of an organ swells up in the space, 'you realise that the whole colour in the entire room is diffused…'.[2] He continues to wax lyrical about the experience, likening it to being 'inside a black and white television screen', then eventually wondering how 'time before…[his] birth [could] exist in colour'.[3] The music surging through the cathedral seems to unground his trail of thought, or mirror his increasingly discombobulated recollection of the experience: the enthusiasm expressed by the artist eventually seems content-less, becoming sheer affect. This has the effect of undercutting the apparent sincerity of his words. We can't face them seriously. Instead they seem a parody of art appreciation. This is, perhaps, the titular 'Crisis'. It is as if the artwork can only be appreciated and enjoyed sarcastically, with humour. In this sense, the artist seems to express something like the pessimistic

[1] Transcribed from Jordan Wolfson, *The Crisis* (2004), available to view at UbuWeb Film, http://www.ubu.com/film/wolfson_crisis.html, accessed 21/06/16.
[2] Wolfson, *The Crisis*, http://www.ubu.com/film/wolfson_crisis.html, accessed 21/06/16.
[3] Wolfson, *The Crisis*, http://www.ubu.com/film/wolfson_crisis.html, accessed 21/06/16.

worldview described in Chapter One. Here this pessimism is directed toward a deadpan performance of aesthetic experience that appears stupid, dumb and funny.

Wolfson can be seen to express this deadpan comedy again in a later video, titled *Raspberry Poser* (2012): a montage of film, animation and music that appears to exemplify many of the key features of our cotemporary screen space. Indeed the work simply seems to repeat its clichés in a deadpan technique that can be likened to a particular strain of 'deadpan' comedy. This is perhaps epitomised by the comedian Andy Kaufman and his notorious refusal to tell jokes. Reflecting on this approach, Kaufman writes that 'there are times when real life is funnier than deliberate comedy. Therefore I try to create the illusion of…"real-life"…if I were to let people in on the joke, it wouldn't have that effect'.[4] Kaufman's comedy simply repeated real life situations, allowing them to play out, without any obvious comedic effect or commentary added. Likewise Wolfson, in his early work *The Crisis* and, as I will argue, in *Raspberry Poser*, repeats real life situations without any obvious artistic commentary or creative licence. Instead, as with *Raspberry Poser*, he repeats the tropes of contemporary screen space, and in deadpan repetition it is made to seem funny.

The phrase screen space refers to the system of screens that increasingly mediate and reconfigure our lived reality, so that, to put it simply, every aspect of our lived experience takes place in a space that is increasingly interwoven with and mediated via our experience of screens. Indeed, in their co-authored book on screen mediated relationships, *Modern Romance* (2015), Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg refer to some astonishing statistics regarding the average amount of time we are now spending with screens. Certainly these figures seem to confirm the importance of the screen in our relationship to the world. They write that: 'In 2014 the average American spent 444 minutes per day - nearly 7.5 hours - in front of a screen, be it a smartphone, tablet, television, or personal computer. That's higher than the numbers in most European countries, where people spend "only" 5 to 7 hours per day with screens, yet it's not nearly enough to put the United States in the top five nations: China, Brazil, Vietnam, the Philippines, and, in first place, Indonesia, where people

[4] Andy Kaufman [1981] quoted in Bill Zehmne, *Lost in the Funhouse: The Life & Mind of Andy Kaufman* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 297.

spend 9 hours per day staring at a screen'.[5] The system of screens that surround us and structure our time and attention comprises a network of related, differently scaled, differently technologically-based screens (phone screens, TV screens, computer screens, laptop screens, advertising hoardings), which pervade and mediate almost all our everyday spaces; in particular, supporting and conditioning our activities of consumption and production. Navigating this network, we hop from one type of information to another, absorbing each screen's content as part of an undifferentiated data stream. The screen breaks up reality and puts it back together again as a jigsaw of interconnected, interrelated, interactive, responsive and permeable electronic display units.

In short, I want to claim that we have come to experience reality as a montage of discontinuous screens and 'depolarised' images. This term is taken from Jean Baudrillard, who employs it in his description of screen-mediated information in the essay 'Xerox and Infinity' (1990). 'Depolarisation' refers to the way in which space on the screen creates 'a dimension that is no longer quite human, an excentric dimension', meaning that the things we see on screens are disjointed and detached from their normal symbolic or material register.[6] They are decontextualized and seem to exist in a vacuum: 'things are no longer anything but what they are' and all juxtapositions between images are violently discontinuous.[7] I will argue that *Raspberry Poser's* reflection of this contemporary screen space works to demonstrate the exhaustion of the traditionally avant-garde technique of montage. The system of screens that surround us might be seen to functionalise, or make banal, this artistic technique - montage - that was once, and still is in some contemporary art discourse, attributed with the power to cognitively awaken the spectator as an active political agent. Wolfson, however, gives us a montage that is funny in its pathetic lack of difference from the general screen space surrounding us. In this respect, I

[5] Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg, *Modern Romance* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), Kindle edition. The figures they cite come from come from a report on Internet usage by Mary Meeker of the venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers. See 'Mary Meeker's 2014 internet trends report: all the slides plus highlights', *Quartz* (May 2014), http://qz.com/214307/mary-meeker-2014-internet-trends-report-all-the-slides/, accessed 21/08/15.

[6] Jean Baudrillard, 'Xerox and Infinity', *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* [1990], tr. James Benedict (London; New York: Verso, 1993), 55.

[7] Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact* [2004], tr. Chris Turner (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 26.

want to ask whether *Raspberry Poser* evidences the exhaustion of montage as an active category of dialectical visual experience. I also want to ask what value we can place on a work of contemporary art - such as Wolfson's *dead* montage - that draws attention to, exaggerates and exploits the redundancy of avant-garde models of visual culture.

## post internet montage

*Raspberry Poser* is a looping, thirteen minute, fifty-six second moving-image sequence of hand-drawn animation, CGI (computer generated imagery) graphics, photography and live action overdubbed with some pop music: Beyoncé's *Sweet Dreams*, Mazzy Star's *Fade into You* and Roy Orbison's *Only the Lonely*. It is neither fully film nor fully animation, instead, it transitions between the two and appears as a hybrid work that combines and interweaves multiple visual categories. In this sense, Wolfson has been described as emblematic of 'a younger generation of artists whose work cannot be ascribed to any one specific medium'.[8] *Raspberry Poser* is typical therefore, of the contemporary moving image, which is, to borrow Steven Shaviro's term, 'post-cinematic', meaning based in digital and computer-based media and interweaving various media forms (animated, computer generated, photographic) into the same image.[9] Moving image works are now 'post-cinematic' hybrids: spatiotemporal composites of spatiotemporally discrete elements. Wolfson's *Raspberry Poser* is the third in a trilogy of works made by the artist that experiments with this form of the moving image. The first is titled *Con Leche* (2009) and the second is titled *Animation, Masks* (2011) (figs. 4.1 and 4.2).[10]

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[8] This statement formed part of the accompanying text to Wolfson's exhibition as part of Klaus Biesenbach and Hans Ulrich Obrist's '14 Rooms', displayed at Art Basel 2014. See Uncredited author, 'Epilogue - Jordan Wolfson', *14 Rooms*, http://www.14rooms.net/en/Artists/Jordan-Wolfson, accessed 20/10/14.

[9] See Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester; Washington: Zero Books, 2010).

[10] *Interview Magazine* suggests that *Con Leche* (2009) is the work for which Wolfson 'first gained wide notice'. In this 22 minute film, hand-drawn cartoons of small milk-filled Diet Coke bottles march around film-footage of desolate Detroit sidewalks – abandoned factories and ruined warehouses covered in graffiti – 'to the soundtrack of a female actress reading text from Internet queries such as "How do I know I'm gay?" or "Why don't I have any black friends?"'. *Animation, Masks* (2012) is a twelve minute computer generated animation of a stereotypical 'Shylock' figure, composited from a Google Image search for 'Evil Jew'. This character aears in front of a changing backdrop of interior photographs holding a copy of Vogue. Throughout the video his facial features morph and he mimes along to an intimate conversation between two lovers, and to a range of stock characters reciting Richard Brautigan's 'Love Poem'. See Christopher Bollen's introduction to Helen

Wolfson is an American artist based in New York and Los Angeles. In 2003, he received his B.F.A. in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design. He has since exhibited globally. In 2009 he was awarded the Cartier award from the Frieze foundation, and in 2013 the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent exhibited the first major survey of his work to date, *Jordan Wolfson: Ecce Homo/le Poseur*. At the time of writing he is in his mid-thirties and affiliated with Sadie Coles and David Zwirner commercial galleries. In April 2014, he had a much publicised solo show at David Zwirner in New York. This show featured *Raspberry Poser* but hit the headlines for *Female Figure* (2014): a life-size, highly-sexualized robot, made to look like a stripper with a witch mask, fitted with a motion-sensor (in order to look at and intuitively respond to spectators), that danced to pop music (fig. 4.3). The work was made in collaboration with Spectral Motion, an animatronics studio in California. All three 'editions' of *Female Figure* were promptly sold to 'megacollectors', one of whom was Eli Broad whose collection of modern and contemporary art also includes Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Damien Hirst, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Koons.[11] Wolfson's sudden notoriety within the contemporary art world encouraged Holland Cotter, in the *New York Times*, to refer to him as 'the latest in a line of young male artists to shoot to the top of the New York career heap with relatively little buildup'.[12]

Wolfson is often lumped together with what is known as a 'post internet' trend in contemporary art. This term functions to unify the dispersed nature of contemporary artworks according to the premise that they were only conceptually or technically possible because of the internet. The term was coined by the artist Marisa Olsen sometime between 2007 and 2009. She suggests that '[e]verything is always-already *postinternet*…[and] all works produced now are produced in the *postinternet* era'.[13] The critic Gene McHugh also helped popularize the term in his influential 'post

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Marten, 'Jordan Wolfson', *Interview Magazine,* (December-January 2012), http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/jordan-wolfson#_, accessed 20/10/14.

[11] Jori Finkel details Zwirner's sale of the three editions of *Female Figure* in the article: 'Reality Bytes', *W Magazine* (December 2014), http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2014/12/jordan-wolfson-robot-artist/photos/, accessed 08/10/15.

[12] Holland Cotter, 'Where Blue-Chip Brands Meet Brassy Outliers, From Hot to Schlock: Holland Cotter Tours Chelsea Galleries', *New York Times* (April 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/arts/design/from-hot-to-schlock-holland-cotter-tours-chelsea-galleries.html, accessed 08/10/15.

[13] Marisa Olsen 'PostInternet', *Foam* Magazine, no. 29 (2012), 59–63.

internet' blog, which ran from December 2009 to September 2010 and was subsequently published in book form. In this McHugh clarifies that:

> The Internet, of course, was not over. That wasn't the point…So what changed? On some general level, the rise of social networking and the professionalization of web design reduced the technical nature of network computing, shifting the Internet from a specialized world for nerds and the technologically-minded, to a mainstream world for nerds, the technologically-minded and grandmas and sports fans and business people and painters and everyone else. Here comes everybody.[14]

So, 'post internet' refers to a reality in which the Internet is an inseparable part of everyday life, for everybody. This condition, for Olsen and McHugh, reconfigures contemporary artistic practice, which is now 'always-already' related to the post internet milieu. Wolfson is no exception. Nevertheless, his work stands out from the crowd. Much 'post internet' artistic practice is characterised by a sense of the liberatory possibilities of art's relationship to current technologies, seen by some critics as building on the 'net.art' of the 1990s. This was a web based community of artists who, Marco Deseriis and Giuseppe Marano write, explored 'the limits and possibilities of many-to-many communication in a techno-social environment'.[15] They excitedly embraced the internet as a tool for open and democratic artistic production; net.artist Vuk Cosic even suggested that '[a]ll art up to now has been merely a substitute for the Internet'.[16] It was as if the spread of the internet in the '90s represented the culmination of the historic avant-garde's desire to 'collapse art into life'. The speculative potential for net.art was proclaimed on a fake CNN web page (fig. 4.4) published online in 1996 by the net.art community, which stated that 'the artist devoted to the more advanced and intense art experience now has the production means in his hands. The difference is that today he also controls the distribution'.[17]

The idea that the 'post internet' generation of artists takes on the responsibilities

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[14] Gene McHugh, *Post Internet: Notes on the Internet and Art* (Link Editions, Brescia, 2011), 5.
[15] Marco Deseriis and Giuseppe Marano, *Net.art. The Art of Connecting* (Milan: Shake Edizioni, 2003), English translation available at http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0402/msg00029.html, accessed 25/04/16.
[16] Vuk Cosic quoted in Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2006), 220.
[17] Transcribed from 'Specific Net.art found possible', *CNN Interactive 1989-05-16,* reproduced at http://www.ljudmila.org/naps/cnn/cnn.htm, accessed 25/04/16.

and aspirations of net.art is reflected in Cadence Kinsey's writing on contemporary art. In her argument, 'post internet' art inherits Felix Guattari's notion of 'molecular alternative practices', which call for a 'redemptive re-appropriation of both media…and *the* media'.[18] With this, Kinsey refers to an idea of artistic practice focused on the 'removal of the alienating properties of media, its normalising and pressurising tendencies'.[19] Thus 'post internet' can be seen as a 'liberating framework through which to reject the claim that the concerns of technology are antithetical to the concerns of art'.[20] Kinsey's argument therefore pursues more or less traditional avant-garde aims, above all those of 'de-alienation'. In this sense, the internet becomes another form of what is sometimes called 'tactical media'.[21] However, Wolfson's form of 'post internet' art refuses such determinations.

The critic Timo Feldhaus has praised Wolfson's practice for its demonstration of the cynical inverse to 'the optimism that characterises post-Internet art'.[22] His work does not seem to offer 'liberation', 'redemption' or escape from 'alienation'. Instead, Feldhaus writes that Wolfson's practice is symptomatic of the 'narrowness of the space with which artistically inflected thought can still respond to technology'.[23] And Martin Germann and Aram Moshayedi have called the aforementioned trilogy of moving image works (that includes *Raspberry Poser*) a 'family of apparent degenerates'.[24] Further to this, the artist explained to me in conversation that his primary interest is simply in 'witnessing the world' (as opposed to actively

[18] Cadence Kinsey, 'From Post-Media to Post-Medium: Rethinking Ontology in Art and Technology' in eds. C. Arich, J. B. Slater, A. Iles and O. L. Schult *Provocative Alloys: A Post-Media Anthology*, (Lüneburg; Berlin: Post-Media Lab and Mute Books, 2013), 72.
[19] Kinsey, 'From Post-Media to Post-Medium: Rethinking Ontology in Art and Technology', 72.
[20] Kinsey, 'From Post-Media to Post-Medium: Rethinking Ontology in Art and Technology', 81.
[21] 'Tactical Media', Pramod K. Nayor writes, 'explores the tactical potential of consumer electronics, especially the video camcorder, as a means of social mobilization'. They are 'based on temporary alliances provoked by an immediate issue or event that utilizes media forms to protest, campaign, and organize opinions for anti-government or anti-corporate purposes'. Pramod K.Nayor, *An Introduction to New Media and Cybercultures* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 100.
[22] Timo Feldhaus, 'In the Moment of Terror', *Spike Art Quarterly*, no. 40 (Summer 2014), http://spikeart.at/en/a/magazin/back/Encounters, accessed 20/10/14.
[23] Feldhaus, 'Jordan Wolfson's Robot: In the Moment of Terror', http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/jordan-wolfsons-robot-moment-terror, accessed 20/10/14.
[24] Martin Germann and Aram Moshayedi, 'Introduction', in Aram Moshayedi ed., *Jordan Wolfson: Ecce Homo/le Poseur* (Köln: Walther König, 2013), 8.

intervening in it) and that he's keen for his work to appear 'polluted' by it.[25] He is concerned, it seems, to repeat or reflect the lived reality of our screen-mediated world, providing us with something like a 'cynical enlightenment' of our historical condition.[26] By this, I mean to invoke a form of cynicism discussed by Michel Foucault in *The Courage of the Truth*, the last course of lectures that he delivered at the College de France in 1984.[27] This form of cynicism represented an aggressive and 'untamed' materialism that sought to strip conventions, societal obligations and

[25] In my own conversation with Wolfson, he explained his non-programmatic methodology in the following terms: 'I use the word pollution a lot, but the idea of something polluted doesn't necessarily mean something poisonous, but instead that it has been tainted. If you were to have white paint and drop a spoonful of red paint in, it would pollute the white paint. And I always think of pop culture and all these aspects of our lives as one big stew, and everything is kind of swirling together. But I'm not an authority on popular culture, I'm not an authority on psychological analysis, I'm not an authority on any of these things. I'm just a person looking at the world and reprocessing it, and it just comes out the way it comes out. I don't want to turn myself into a politician or someone who's going after something; I'm not interested in that. I'm just interested in my own witnessing of the world'. Jordan Wolfson, Skype conversation with author, 04/03/15.

[26] This is not to say that Wolfson is the only contemporary practitioner whose work can be understood in these terms. For instance, Amalia Ulman's 2014 project *Excellences and Perfections* involved the artist conducting a scripted online performance on her Instagram and Facebook profiles from April to September. Here she maintained the image of an alluring, luxury, consumerist lifestyle of the type that is typical on social media: for instance, posting artfully arranged flowers, expensive couture items, tasteful lingerie shots, weekend city breaks and meticulous brunch dishes. Ulman carefully replicated the conventions attached to this lifestyle, including captioning idiosyncrasies (i.e. #friends, #nails, #strongisthenewskinny, #foodporn, #gratitude) and the pacing and frequency of new posts. An article in Rhizome discusses how neatly this work slipped into the social economy of social media: 'For three months, she allowed her profiles to be exactly what social media seems to demand—that she be a "Hot Babe." As a result, she garnered the support of other women who had endured similar makeovers or procedures. She earned criticism for seeming to promote retrograde physical ideals, she was the target of cheap flattery, vulgar propositions, and abusive comments. Her close friends were often confused, unable to demarcate the Ulman of social media as a separate fiction…' Michael Conner, 'First Look: Amalia Ulman – Excellences and Perfections', *Rhizome* (October 2014), http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/20/first-look-amalia-ulmanexcellences-perfections/, accessed 15/10/15. See also Ulman's Instagram profile, https://instagram.com/amaliaulman/?hl=en, accessed 15/10/15.

[27] This Ancient cynicism is associated with Diogenes of Sinope (c.404—323 B.C.E.) - 'the dog' philosopher. Foucault argues that the cynic mocked societal obligations and etiquette by actively seeking out humiliation and dishonor. And 'within the accepted humiliation', Foucault explains, the cynic 'is able to turn the situation around, as it were, and take back control of it'. In order to illustrate this point, Foucault discusses a humorous anecdote about Diogenes eating dinner: 'There is the story of Diogenes who, eating on the public square, is treated by the passers-by as a dog: You eat like a dog, they tell him. And Diogenes immediately turns the situation around, accepting the humiliation. He accepts the humiliation and turns it around by saying: But you too are dogs, since only dogs form a circle around a dog which is eating. I am a dog, but so too are you, no less than I am. One day he was at a dinner where he was thrown a bone, since he is a dog. At that point he left with his bone, returned, and pissed on the guests, like a dog'. See Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the College de France 1983 – 1984* [2008], tr. Graham Burchell (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 261 – 262.

philosophic thought of its idealistic trappings so that they would be revealed as something banal. The cynical mode of life, Foucault writes, is one that mocks 'pointless conventions and all superfluous opinions'.[28] It does not indicate a withdrawal from society, but instead reveals what Foucault calls 'the scandal of truth'.[29]

Indeed Wolfson's work seems to revel in a negativity that is lacking in a 'post internet' culture of artistic production, and not addressed by critical claims currently made for this culture. Instead I aim to follow a lead suggested by Esther Leslie who, in a recent short essay, suggests an explicitly Adornian reading of his work, invoking the philosopher's final aphorism from *Minima Moralia* that 'perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world'.[30] In this understanding Wolfson endeavors to provide us with or reveal one such perspective. This informs Leslie's description of the protagonist from Wolfson's earlier film *Animation, Masks*, who 'sheds light on his own negativity. He exudes his own would-be messianic light, illuminating in liquid crystal his own environment as a parade of distortions'.[31] We might also remind ourselves of a passage from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, which states that 'in the face of the abnormity into which reality is developing, art's inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable'.[32] In response to this, art must 'become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber'.[33] Perhaps this uncertainty might be claimed for Wolfson. It is any rate Wolfson's negativity that I find interesting. And it is this negativity that I want to interrogate, and question the value of in *Raspberry Poser*, which in what follows will be taken as exemplary of his work more generally.

## database aesthetics

[28] Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the College de France 1983 – 1984*, 180.
[29] Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the College de France 1983 – 1984*, 180.
[30] See Esther Leslie, 'Complex Messiah', in Aram Moshayedi ed., *Jordan Wolfson: Ecce Homo/le Poseur* (Köln, Walther König, 2013), and Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951], tr. E. F. N. Jephcott (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 247.
[31] Leslie, 'Complex Messiah'.
[32] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970], tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London; New York: Continuum, 1997), 2.
[33] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

*Raspberry Poser* begins with a three second live-action shot of an empty showroom kitchen filmed in New York's heavily gentrified SoHo district. The scene contains numerous displays of gleaming and unused reflective surfaces. Two squirming, computer-generated HIV virus-type figures bounce and skitter around on top of the backdrop, like squeaky, red plastic dog toys (fig. 4.5). Despite the reflective façades on display, the virus-like objects do not produce any reflection or trace of their presence. We are made hyper-aware, at this point, of the layering of visual elements in post-production editing, which generate composite images from discrete, non-interacting, spatial elements. The soundtrack to this grouping of kitchen and virus is Beyoncé's 2009 synthpop single *Sweet Dreams* (originally titled 'Beautiful Nightmare'). The film continues to cut and sync alternate shots of equivalently chic interior stores at an irregular rhythm. The HIV viruses multiply and disappear and appear again, their candy apple red form riddled with peg-like nodules that bulge, wobble and spill across the clean environment. Wolfson also throws in a number of animated anthropomorphic characters, some computer generated and some more traditional-style hand-drawn cartoons. A silvery CGI floating condom that sprays red hearts like bubbles, a cartoon lock and key in coitus, a docile cartoon elephant lying on a rotating trapdoor, an angry cartoon boy in a birdcage and CGI pills that swarm, morph and collect into various symbols - hearts, triangles, gender signs, an anarchist 'circle-A'. The background shots switch variously to images of, in the artist's words, 'houses being renovated', inner city New York 'Technogyms,' 'heterosexual teenage scenes', and 'erotic drawings'.[34] The artist himself appears in *Raspberry Poser* dressed as a stereotypical 'punk', wandering listlessly around parks in Paris, eating salad and playing innocuous pranks on strangers. Certainly, the film does not appear to illustrate Beyoncé's (or Mazzy Star's, or Roy Orbison's) song nor follow its narrative logic. Despite this, in my view, the experience of watching *Raspberry Poser* is compelling. It seems to borrow the music's emotional affect, allowing it to surge in and charge up the haphazard imagery. In this sense, Wolfson's film is experienced like most commercial music videos, in which a powerful soundtrack

[34] These descriptions of scenes and background imagery were made by Wolfson in a Skype conversation with author 04/03/15.

often seems to supply a series of disconnected images with its libidinal energy.[35] One effect of this, in both music videos and Wolfson's work, is that the disconnected visual material is barely noticed, but appears unified.

The supposedly disconnected arrangement of image and sound in *Raspberry Poser* (and in other works by Wolfson) has perplexed critics. Paddy Johnson, in a 2014 article, asked 'Is Jordan Wolfson's art meaningless?' and Germann and Moshayedi have observed of his work's scattergun collage of references that 'it might be easy to say that the references throughout…are empty, that any and all meaning has been evacuated'.[36] As this latter comment indicates, such criticisms arise from the extreme editing technique Wolfson employs, which quickly cuts together discontinuous elements. For instance, as I have indicated, the HIV viruses in *Raspberry Poser* are visually discontinuous in type from the imagery behind them, and so might appear meaningless because they seem to have no clear links to other imagery. Indeed, discussing his practice, Wolfson has insisted that there 'is no didactic message in the work. The message is form…and letting whatever meaning surfaces exist'.[37] And talking specifically about *Raspberry Poser*, Wolfson clarifies that he is 'not trying to make these elements come together…by any means or any narrative. There is no story. There is no clarity of content, only isolated areas of content…I am definitely concentrating on inventing and using a kind of form that binds these subjects together, but also abandons any clarity of form…if a pocket of really Freudian content came out, I would then figure out a way to balance its meaning'.[38] This idea came across in my own conversation with the artist. For instance, he insisted that the music used in *Raspberry Poser* is just another formal element, something that is balanced and kept in equilibrium with the other areas of

[35] The affective power of Beyoncé's song is evident in James Montgomery's enthusiastic review for MTV. He describes 'Sweet Dreams's' 'gnarly low end (which kind of sounds like Michael Jackson's "Beat It" for about half a second)', and praises 'the spare snare kicks, the expansive-yet-molecular chorus — sonically', he writes, 'it's as adventurous as anything she's ever released'. See James Montgomery, 'Beyonce Gets Crazy, Sexy, Cool In 'Sweet Dreams' Video', *MTV News* (2009), http://www.mtv.com/news/1615576/beyonce-gets-crazy-sexy-cool-in-sweet-dreams-video/, accessed 23/10/14.

[36] Germann and Moshayedi, 'Introduction', *Jordan Wolfson: Ecce Homo/le Poseur*, 8.

[37] Jordan Wolfson quoted in Paul Soto, 'Flattening Exercises: Q+A with Jordan Wolfson', *Art in America* (December 2012), http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/jordan-wolfson-redcat/, accessed 01/10/14.

[38] Wolfson quoted in Soto, 'Flattening Exercises: Q+A with Jordan Wolfson', http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/jordan-wolfson-redcat/, accessed 01/10/14.

content: 'With the music I thought, what if I just take it, as if it is a colour and put it in…as if you were taking a piece of an object or a piece of an image, and then cutting it…so it's like a cropped image as a piece of music'.[39] This idea of the work being a balancing of complex elements is further stressed in the artist's description of his editing technique: 'if you can imagine holding a ball', Wolfson explained, 'and you are constantly trying to balance the ball in different ways on your hand so that it never remains static, that's how I think about editing. Something that is never static…'[40] In these circumstances, when the artist has so carefully edited and flattened the elements in the work, how can we understand the work, or at least not resort to calling it 'meaningless'?

One critical approach might be to see the origins of Wolfson's technique of discontinuous, fast cutting and syncing of references, images and sounds in the avant-garde theorisation of montage. *Raspberry Poser* resembles both the spatial compositions that layer different elements in the same frame, as in surrealist photomontage, and the shot-to-shot successive montage, where images are cut together sequentially, as in the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic montage, sequences seen, for example, in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927). The former can be identified in the aforementioned scenes of kitchen interiors overlaid with CGI viruses. And the latter, for instance, is evident five minutes into the film with a ten second sequence of fast and interchanging snapshot-style photos of, in the artist's words, 'heterosexual teenage scenes'.

A common thread in montage's theorisation across the arts - including both photomontage and cinematic montage - is the idea of violent juxtapositions that produce cognitive emancipation in the viewer. For example, Eisenstein stressed the dissociative power of aggressively conflicting cuts in cinematic montage, in which concepts and ideas in the viewer are produced 'from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another'.[41] In his essay 'The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram', he compares the total 'phalanx of montage pieces' in a film 'to the series

[39] Wolfson, Skype conversation with author, 04/03/15.
[40] Wolfson, Skype conversation with author, 04/03/15.
[41] Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form) [1929]' in ed. Richard Taylor, *The Eisenstein Reader*, tr. Richard Taylor and William Powell (London: BFI, 1998), 95.

of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile'.[42] The colliding juxtaposition of imagery fuels the film, giving it momentum and thrust. An example of this process can be found in Eisenstein's first full-length feature, *Strike* (1925): in which a scene of striking workers being attacked is abruptly cut together with a shot of a bull being slaughtered. The violent combination of these images draws parallels between the workers and cattle: both appear as appendages to the production process, beaten down and easily replaced.

Similarly, in his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin employed a terminology of 'awakening' to describe the effects of surrealist photomontage, 'in which things put on their true - surrealist - face'.[43] Brigid Doherty, glossing Benjamin's understanding of montage, describes it as a 'medium of illumination and agitation intended to arouse the reader cognitively as well as politically'.[44] In the *Arcades Project,* Benjamin conceives of capitalism as a 'natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces'.[45] It is against this backdrop that montage functioned. Its de-naturalization of images through their shocking juxtaposition was felt to resist the prevailing narcoleptic ideology, by jolting us out of its 'dreamtime'.[46] Moreover, Benjamin understood his own work in the *Arcades Project* as a kind of 'literary montage': an attempt to construct a materialist history of nineteenth-century Parisian life through the textual assemblage of fragmented references.[47] Its criticality lay in its bringing to

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[42] Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram' [1929], in Jay Leyda ed., *Film Form,* tr. Jay Leyda (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt, Inc, 1977), 39.

[43] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 464.

[44] Brigid Doherty, '"*The Colportage Phenomenon of Space" and The Place of Montage in* The Arcades Project', in Beatrice Hanssen ed., *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), 160.

[45] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 391.

[46] For Benjamin this 'dreamtime' (orig. *Zeitraum*) is a fact of nineteenth-century capitalism, in which, he writes 'the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep'. See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 389. Glossing Benjamin's notion of 'dreamtime' and its association with ideology, Max Pensky writes that capitalism 'deploys the hypnogogic appearance of endless progress to mask its own delusional core'. See Max Pensky, 'Geheimmittel: *Advertising and Dialectical Images in Benjamin's* Arcades Project', in Beatrice Hanssen ed., *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), 114.

[47] Benjamin explains of the work: 'Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse-these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them'. See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.

light the disjointedness of the everyday world, juxtaposing, for instance, signs of luxury with misery (for example, Benjamin establishes a 'dialectic of fashion' with the relationship between 'pleasure' and the 'cadaver', drawing upon peculiar accounts of morgues being visited for entertainment in mid-nineteenth century Paris.)[48] In Benjamin's view, the shock of these de-idealized images might arouse the reader from their 'dream-filled-sleep' and into a more critical awareness of their historical circumstance.

A sense of shock was also important to the convulsive images of the Dadaists, who employed photomontage as part of their project to outrage public opinion. For instance, Hans Richter famously pronounced his desire to arouse 'the bourgeoisie to rage, and through rage to a shamefaced self-awareness'.[49] In her writing on Dada, Doherty has argued that the 'montage materializations' of the 1920s be understood in relation to 'the bodily materializations of traumatic psychic shock that characterized the war neuroses'.[50] Commenting on a famous passage from Richard Huelsenbeck's 'Dadaist Manifesto' (1918), which utilises a vivid rhetoric of shock, dismemberment and frenzy, she outlines the ethical imperative that undergirds the shattered imagery in photomontage:

> dada's art is to have a "conscious content" in the form of dismembered embodiments of contemporary life…The dadaist's own body is to be bloodied inside and out (leaking from the hand as from the heart, in pain both physically and emotionally) and shattered in a way that will allow him - perhaps compel him - to comprehend the frenzy and the specific intellect of his age because he can identify with them, because, we must suppose, both the frenzy and the intellect, both the madness and the consciousness will be his own.[51]

Thus, with the early twentieth-century avant-garde, the capacity to induce a form of historical consciousness is specifically associated with the fragmented form of

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[48] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 909.
[49] Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 9.
[50] Brigid Doherty, '"We Are All Neurasthenics!" or, the Trauma of Dada Montage', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997), 85.
[51] Doherty, '"We Are All Neurasthenics!" or, the Trauma of Dada Montage', 89. The passage from the 1918 'Dadaist Manifesto', interpreted by Doherty, is, as follows: 'The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousand fold problems of the day, an art which one can see has let itself be thrown by the explosions of the last week, which is forever gathering up its limbs after yesterday's crash. The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, holding fast to the intellect of their time, bleeding from hands and hearts'. See Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Dadaist Manifesto', tr. Ralph Manheim, included in Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 104.

montage.

Georg Grosz claimed to have invented the technique with John Heartfield in 1916 with a cardboard-supported collage of scattershot elements, which recalls the radical discontinuities of Wolfson's cut-up imagery. 'On a piece of cardboard', he writes, 'we pasted a mishmash of advertisements for hernia belts, student song books and dog food, labels from schnapps and wine bottles, and photographs from picture papers, cut up at will'.[52] Indeed, certain points of commonality might be seen to exist between Wolfson's work and that of the Dada and Surrealist artists. Bearing out such links, Wolfson has said that he understands the imagery he uses in relation to Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and its representation of late nineteenth-century Parisian arcades as 'surreal dream spaces'.[53] It is as if he sees New York (specifically the SoHo area) in the present day as being like Paris then - an environment cluttered with the debris of the past, now gentrified, smoothed over and thoroughly sanitized. The HIV viruses function as an artefact of his growing up in a 'generation where we were impacted and conditioned by a fear of the HIV virus'.[54] Thus, in *Raspberry Poser*, the streets, shops and gyms of SoHo are made to seem haunted by its presence.[55] From this perspective, Wolfson's discontinuous mish-mash of elements might be seen as exemplary in a Benjaminian sense: a montage that rescues and reactivates fragments of the past in order to work against and resist a state of historical amnesia imposed by the 'dream time' of contemporary New York.

And yet it isn't possible to see Wolfson's work simply as inheriting the older model of montage, with its radical efficacy intact. In part, I want to argue, this is because reality itself has moved on and superseded those strategies of the early avant-garde. Indeed, in the intervening period, the idea of a city constructed with a montage-like aesthetic of violent juxtapositions has become something like a postmodern orthodoxy. The fragmented image of the city that emerges in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as a figure of critical resistance has come to be known as a structural

[52] Georg Grosz quoted in Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 117.
[53] This description of *The Arcades Project* made by Wolfson in Skype conversation with author 04/03/15.
[54] Wolfson, Skype conversation with author, 04/03/15.
[55] This is, however, an inadvertent effect of the work. The artist explicitly stated to me that *Raspberry Poser's* inclusion of SoHo was not in direct reference to one of the main locations of the AIDS crisis. Nevertheless, Wolfson does very explicitly refer to these environments as 'dream spaces'.

feature of the postmodern city. In the view of many observers of this phenomenon, the chaotic, discontinuous and disorientating character of the city now seems to do the inverse of Benjamin's montage: de-realizing and slackening our purchase on historical reality.[56] Moreover, the cut-up discontinuity and seeming meaninglessness of *Raspberry Poser's* content now reads as a structural aspect of contemporary screen culture, as Shaviro has observed, in which 'multiple differences ramify endlessly; but none of these differences actually makes a difference, since they are all completely interchangeable'.[57] Indeed the seeming 'meaninglessness' and overwhelming 'flatness' of Wolfson's work - in both its formal and affective register - serves to throw this fact into relief. The artist is careful, I think, not to lapse into a vain or skeuomorphic reprise of the older, analogue avant-garde technique, which is built upon the physical cutting, dismembering and suturing of image fragments. Instead, the fragmented elements of the film have a fluid quality: appearing to glide, slip and flow without any sense of conflict or friction.

This is not to say that a causal association between violent juxtaposition and cognitive emancipation does not persist in current writing about art and the moving image. For some commentators this relationship (to my mind, problematically) remains a criterion of value in contemporary moving image practice; as if montage's affiliation to critique, or to a critical perspective, has persevered despite shifts in visual culture that normalize and therefore compromise its immediate shock-value. For example, Pasi Väliaho, in his book *Biopolitical Screens: Images, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (2014), appears to pick up on the visceral physicality of the method, suggesting that the technique continues to generate forms of resistance to current 'biopolitical' structures of power.

> Through montage, incisions into and intervals between images can emerge that decontextualize, inject indefiniteness into, and bring forward novel figurations in perception and thinking…spatiotemporal intervals, interruptions, associations

[56] See, for instance, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1992), Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2001) and Jean Baudrillard, *America*, tr. Geoff Dyer (London; New York: Verso, 2010).
[57] Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 133.

> and dissociations in the movement of images on the screen's surface serve as…cuts wherein the images we live by can reinvent themselves.[58]

For Väliaho, montage retains the productive dialectical value discussed by Eisenstein in his early essays on the film form, whereby the combination of discrete images produces something new - a 'transcendental (conceptual) result'.[59] Indeed, Väliaho argues that montage is indispensable if we are to 'unleash the political potential of images'.[60] This line of thinking is also evident in a dismissive review of contemporary artist Isaac Julien's film *Playtime* (2014) by Alberto Toscano. Toscano's article, published in *Mute* magazine, criticizes Julien's seven-screen installation film, which explicitly references Eisenstein's unrealised project to make a film of Marx's *Das Kapital*. Toscano condemns *Playtime* for its lack of explicit Eisensteinian montage technique. On this basis, he accuses Julien of merely reiterating 'the representational clichés through which we typify capitalism'.[61] *Playtime*, Toscano claims, 'is more or less devoid of true montage…creating no flashes of insight, no clashes of form and content, no unexpected connections, no break with the smooth empty time of financialised capital…'[62] Thus, Toscano leans upon a concept of montage - built upon cuts, incisions and insertions - that is inherently felt to be related to critique of and resistance to capitalist temporality. Yet I would argue that these forms have been functionalised by contemporary screen culture, rendering Toscano's criticism of Julien's film empty. Moreover, Toscano assumes that montage is consumed by a viewer actively and with a sense of alertness to its technique. This idealizes the viewer's receptiveness to a process that has become a cultural dominant and therefore part of our everyday visual diet. It is because of a failure to recognise the cultural dominance of montage that this recuperation of the idea of montage-based avant-garde art work, and a viewer who is 'activated' by montage (as in, for instance, the accounts developed by Väliaho and Toscano) does not correspond to our lived reality.

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[58] Pasi Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2014), 94.
[59] Sergei Eisenstein, 'A Dialectical Approach to Film Form [1929]', in Jay Leyda ed., *Film Form*, tr, Jay Leyda (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt, Inc, 1977), 50.
[60] Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain,* 94.
[61] Alberto Toscano, 'The Maid and the Money Form', *Mute* (April 2014), http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/maid-and-money-form, accessed 01/12/14.
[62] Toscano, 'The Maid and the Money Form', http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/maid-and-money-form, accessed 01/12/14.

The avant-garde model of montage is present in *Raspberry Poser*, but as a vague memory - it doesn't work as it should. Wolfson inherits the cut-up haphazardness of the technique but his work lacks its supposed intensity and conflict. Images don't explode into concepts via their interaction. Instead they sit side by side, one on top of the other: there are never any collisions. We might say that Wolfson replaces the physicality of the 'cut' with the gestural 'swipe' or 'flick': referencing, perhaps, our relationship to images that are mediated via a touchscreen device. This reading is encouraged, in particular, by one sequence in *Raspberry Poser* in which the artist appears sitting on a bench: the camera is angled from behind his shoulder, so we can see Wolfson browsing through a series of images on his iPhone - pornographic drawings, manga, Sonic the Hedgehog, Batman, and other cartoon characters, some black and white photographic images. Many of them have already appeared, or will appear, in the film. The artist's laconic swiping through of these images on the phone's screen displays no obvious desire for the deeper, more conflictual manipulation of imagery in avant-garde montage. By contrast, they appear interchangeable and only arbitrarily linked because they are stored in the phone's database: swiped and flicked away, they remain undamaged and, contra Eisenstein, conflict to no effect (fig. 4.6).

Indeed the visual elements in Wolfson's film seem organized according to what Lev Manovich (in his analysis of *The Language of New Media* (2001)) calls 'database logic'.[63] This is a feature, he argues, of the computer age, and by extension its screen culture, in which 'many new media objects…do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence'.[64] Instead, the database operates as a 'collection of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other'.[65] The computer database, Manovich writes, has become a 'true cultural form': a means of representing 'human existence in the world' that can be seen as a contemporary correlate to the novel or cinema in the modern age.[66] Emblematic of this is the figure of the DJ, who selects and combines, cross-referencing and cross-fading, pre-existent

[63] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2001), 218.
[64] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 218.
[65] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 218.
[66] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 215.

elements into a composite whole or 'mix'.[67] In this respect, typical cultural forms now follow database logic: they don't operate according to a linear temporality, as, for instance, a traditional movie in a cinema, instead they are 'spatialized'. This is to say that we consume the cultural object as a spatial rather than temporal form: it is designed to be experienced on various multimedia devices, with images, sounds and hyperlinks that locate the cultural object in a wider database of information rather than in linear time. We can think here about people using their smartphones in the cinema in order to search something related to the motion picture, thereby interrupting the experience of the film as a singular temporal object. Manovich, writing in 2001, cites, as an example of this process; 'CD-ROMs devoted to a single cultural figure such as a famous architect, film director, or writer. Instead of a narrative biography, we are presented with a database of images, sound recordings, video clips, and/or texts that can be navigated in a variety of ways.'[68]

*Raspberry Poser* has a database aesthetic. Its systematic and seemingly arbitrary accumulation of images, sounds and references mirrors the database logic that informs our experience of, and navigation through the world, which now appears as an endless accumulation of images, texts and other information that we can swipe and flick our way through. We might, furthermore, see this database logic as an aesthetic expression of the current disciplinary system: what Antoinette Rouvroy has termed 'algorithmic governmentality', in reference to 'the new information infrastructures [that] 'translate' or 'transcribe' the physical space and its inhabitants…into constantly evolving sets of data points'.[69] For Rouvroy this governance by 'algorithm' increasingly 'impact[s] on how we conduct ourselves, how we attempt to conduct others, and how others attempt to control our conduct'.[70] The impact of algorithmic governmentality on our experience of the world can be seen, for example, with Google's PageRank algorithm, which functions according to a database logic. Similar to Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm, discussed in Chapter

[67] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 135.
[68] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 220.
[69] Antoinette Rouvroy, 'Technology, Virtuality and Utopia: Governmentality in age of automatic computing', in Mireille Hildebrandt and Antoinette Rouvroy eds., *Law, Human Agency and Automatic Computing: The Philosophy of Law Meets the Philosophy of Technology* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 122 – 125.
[70] Rouvroy, 'Technology, Virtuality and Utopia: Governmentality in age of automatic computing', 122 – 125.

Two, PageRank's underlying assumption is that the more important websites (and higher ranked) are those likely to receive more links from other websites and produce more data. Therefore value is attributed to an object according to the quantity of its data production.

> PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at considerably more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; for example, it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important." Using these and other factors, Google provides its views on pages' relative importance.[71]

This system forces us, the then-editor of *Wired* magazine Chris Anderson explains, 'to view data mathematically first and establish a context for it later'.[72] Data, we might say, is foregrounded in the current epistemic paradigm, and the materiality of objects is downplayed. 'Google's founding philosophy', Anderson writes, 'is that we don't know why this page is better than that one. If the statistics of incoming links say it is, that's good enough. No semantic or causal analysis is required. That's why Google can translate languages without actually "knowing" them (given equal corpus data, Google can translate Klingon into Farsi as easily as it can translate French into German). And why it can match ads to content without any knowledge or assumptions about the ads or the content'.[73] Therefore, Google's database logic can be seen to perform a 'flattening exercise' on the content contained in its ever-expanding corpus of knowledge and information. In this system, value is determined via relational systems such as 'hyperlinks' and 'keywords', thereby flattening out the historical and material complexity of the object.

An unfortunate implication of this system was inadvertently revealed by a 2007 project by contemporary artist Cory Arcangel and curator Hanne Mugaas titled *Art Since 1960 (According to the Internet)*. The project took the form of a performative

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[71] 'Google's Definition', quoted in Danny Sullivan, 'What Is Google PageRank? A Guide For Searchers and Webmasters', *Search Engine Land* (April 2007), http://searchengineland.com/what-is-google-pagerank-a-guide-for-searchers-webmasters-11068, accessed 31/07/15.

[72] Chris Anderson, 'The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete', *Wired* (June 2008), http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory, accessed 31/07/15.

[73] Anderson, 'The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete', http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory, accessed 31/07/15.

lecture that asked what you would know about art history since 1960 if your only source of information came from YouTube's database of videos. It turns out that one result of this is an almost complete absence of women. Artist and writer Marisa Olsen put this point to Arcangel and Mugaas. She recalls that:

> they replied simply that it was not an intentional choice, but rather that they let a widely-accepted primer determine the list of names for which they searched, and then they showed only those for which they found results; both steps filtered out women, as history is wont to do. In this sense, Arcangel and Mugaas performed art history, par excellence, by reenacting its cycles of filtration and info-trickling.[74]

So, in this set-up, YouTube's 'database logic' only worked to perpetuate pre-existing prejudices: its system chewed the data and smoothed over any problems or dissonance in the information (here, an overwhelmingly patriarchal canon of art history). As a result, Arcangel and Mugaas's project demonstrated a systemic tendency for the database to simply repeat the logic of its creators, however hegemonic or politically-loaded that information may be, mostly because the database flattens out the historical complexity of its information.

The 'database logic' that undergirds *Raspberry Poser's* haphazard assemblage of imagery can be seen as an aesthetic expression of this value system: this is why it appears to us as meaningless, overwhelmingly flat and without the sparking, colliding imagery that was (and still is for some critics) significant for a critical concept of montage. Indeed, in observation of this type of new media aesthetic, Manovich argues that the 'database logic' of computer-based imagery confirms a shift away from montage toward 'composite' images that are characterised by smoothness and continuity. In the digital composition, or new media object, he explains, elements appear 'next to each other without any attempt to establish contrast, complementarity, or dissonance between them'.[75] For instance, a digitally produced film involves the compositing of elements into 'a single object; that is they are fitted together and adjusted in such a way that their separate identities become invisible…The result is a single seamless image, sound, space, or scene'.[76] The upshot of this is a mode of spectatorship in which violent juxtapositions are invisible:

[74] Olsen 'PostInternet', 62.
[75] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 143.
[76] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 136.

we are conditioned not to see the severed edges or materiality of images, which technically no longer exist in the viewed object and are flattened out by the cultural form of the database.

In part, Manovich's purpose in so arguing is to preserve the critical value and critical difference of true avant-garde montage, or what he calls 'strong' montage, by emphasising its difference from the 'composite' aesthetics that have increasingly come to define commercial moving image practices. This is a montage in which 'juxtapositions of elements…should play a key role in how the work establishes meaning, and its emotional and aesthetic effects'.[77] In other words, these juxtapositions are active and productive: we notice them and are moved by them. This definition relies on montage's difference from contemporary composited moving image practices, whose juxtapositions are smoothed out and made invisible. True or 'strong' montage, in this understanding, remains untainted by commerce. However, it is possible to argue that the shift Manovich identifies, towards the 'database', manifests, instead, a massive dispersion of montage, whereby everything becomes like montage in 'algorithmic governmentality' - i.e. fragmented and recombined as bundles of data points, radically disassociating objects from their normal context and placing them in outwardly violent-seeming juxtapositions. The problem is seeing this as such. Instead, we tend to perceive the implicit discontinuity or montage of the 'database' as a smooth, continuous and seamless composition. Indeed, for some, the so-called supersession of montage by composited images in dominant moving image practices is a misnomer. David Rodowick, for instance, has argued that digital compositions are not, as Manovich has argued, smooth and continuous: by contrast, they are spatial montages of tiny discrete combined and edited elements, which are made invisible to the viewer. An example he cites is Alexandr Sokurov's digitally produced film *Russian Ark* (2002), which appears as one fluid continuous shot. This movie, Rodowick explains, is 'mistakenly characterized as an uninterrupted sequence of eighty-six minutes' duration': mistakenly, because the 'finished work includes more than 30,000 [invisible] "digital

[77] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 158.

events.'"[78] Thus, *Russian Ark* 'is a *montage* work, no less complex in this respect than Sergei Eisenstein's 1927 film *October*'.[79]

In Rouvroy's essay on 'algorithmic governmentality' she (referencing the work of the philosopher of science Ian Hacking) discusses the tendency of people to inadvertently come to affirm and be disciplined by the criteria against which they are evaluated. '[W]hen people are taken as objects of scientific or bureaucratic inquiries for a variety of purposes going from controlling them to helping them, organising them', she writes, '[it] results in the reinforcement and the "viral propagation" of norms, of the criteria of normality and desirability against which individuals are being evaluated, with gratifications for [the] compliant and sanctions for the others'.[80] Therefore, when taken as objects of 'algorithmic governmentality' (i.e. bundles of data), we come to affirm this evaluation and increasingly to perceive the world according to its depolarized categories. In this respect, Rouvroy's remarks seem to confirm, or at least support Baudrillard's description in 'Xerox and Infinity' of the Moebius-like interweaving of 'the computer screen and the mental screen of our own brain' - one becoming an extension of the other.[81] Thus, I want to dispute Manovich's claim that an active montage is possible. This is because, as Rodowick argues, composited images are, at root, always montaged, meaning that there is little difference between the two categories. Instead, we see these montaged images as composited (smooth and seamless) because our capacity to be moved or shocked by images has been negated by the database logic that, in the digital age, structures our experience of the world.

As I have said, the type of montage defined by violent juxtapositions and cognitive emancipation seems only a vague, or spectral, memory in Wolfson's *Raspberry Poser*. However, it is in this sense that Wolfson's montage most accurately reflects the current historical moment. This is, I think, especially visible in the early scenes of the film. Here the background imagery prominently displays a number of highly reflective surfaces and metallic screens, which nevertheless, as I

[78] D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 164-165.
[79] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 164-165.
[80] Rouvroy, 'Technology, Virtuality and Utopia: Governmentality in an age of automatic computing', 130.
[81] Baudrillard, 'Xerox and Infinity', 56.

have pointed out, produce absolutely no reflection or trace of the overlaid image elements. At one moment there is a brief instance of playful interaction between the two image layers, as two HIV viruses seen in a shiny SoHo kitchen store take turns, one after the other, to hop from sink to sink, in and out. But, like something supernatural, they leave no reflection or hint of any meaningful contact. Instead, these chaotic image fragments glide and drift across the environment effortlessly. And accompanied by a pulsing, but similarly irregular soundtrack the montage is experienced as a pleasurable and composite whole. I now want to highlight the function of music in *Raspberry Poser*. It is what provides momentum and pleasure in the film: energising the images with a sense of vital dynamism. In this respect, music can be seen to demonstrate the process by which we can experience a database aesthetic (depolarized and arbitrarily arranged elements) as fluid and continuous. For instance, as I will argue, in the database aesthetic of the music video and contemporary action movie, the shots are typically short, aggressive and violent, yet because the soundtrack is amped-up and foregrounded, we are compelled to experience the chaotic imagery as smooth and seamless.

### music that doesn't work

The soundtrack in *Raspberry Poser* is vital to its effect. It transitions from Beyoncé to Mazzy Star to Roy Orbison in a very blunt manner, reminiscent of an mp3 library of music set to shuffle. At one point Beyoncé is 'chopped and screwed', slowed down and made to sound more emotional. This shift in tempo radically impacts our reception of the images. They appear to parallel and visualize Beyoncé's now exaggerated urgency, despite having absolutely no perceptible relationship to the song. This, more than anything, draws attention to the simple arbitrariness of the images: so empty and insubstantial that they are easily overwhelmed and filled-in, with no resistance, by the pop song. The idea of dissonant or clashing audio-visual elements is made to seem banal. There are some grotesque elements (a cartoon boy who eviscerates himself with a large knife, allowing his entrails to fall out in a bloody soup) and some highly provocative elements, but we nevertheless force these images into a pleasurable dialogue with the song. Perhaps unconsciously we fear that the images would collapse into total incoherence without the music. For this reason,

*Raspberry Poser's* combination of sound and image resembles the form of the music video. As it happens, Wolfson has claimed in conversation with Paul Soto that, with *Raspberry Poser*, he 'really just wanted to make a party video'.[82] Something that, Soto agrees, 'could be on in the background at someone's house party': the sort of video which is, more often than not, a music video.[83]

Diane Railton and Paul Watson, in *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (2011), suggest that the music video is a significant 'part of the more general penetration of screens and screen technology into virtually all aspects of contemporary life'.[84] They note that the music video tends to occupy the screens that supplement our spaces of commerce and leisure, as if by default. 'Whether in the shopping mall or the gym, bar or bowling alley, the airport lounge or the bus shelter', they write, 'it is music video that is often to be found populating these screens, if not forcing us to watch then at least making it increasingly difficult to ignore'.[85] This image form emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the early 1980s. They were, Joan D. Lynch writes, 'born out of necessity…when the record business slumped…with the lessening appeal of radio'.[86] They have always been indissociable from commercial interests. In 1981, for instance, MTV was launched as a new visual system for music distribution in order to kick-start the record industry's profits. It follows, Lynch writes, that 'in many ways music videos most resemble commercials. They are short, usually three to four minutes, aim to engage the viewer in a direct, immediate experience and their major "raison d'etre" is to sell'.[87] The product is, of course, the soundtrack to the visual experience. And for this reason 'the video itself…has no intrinsic…value'.[88]

It is because of its dependence on soundtrack that, for Andrew Goodwin, 'a

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[82] Wolfson quoted in Soto, 'Flattening Exercises: Q+A with Jordan Wolfson', http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/jordan-wolfson-redcat/, accessed 01/10/14.
[83] Soto, 'Flattening Exercises: Q+A with Jordan Wolfson', http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/jordan-wolfson-redcat/, accessed 01/10/14.
[84] Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 7.
[85] Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 7.
[86] Joan D. Lynch, 'Music Videos: From Performance to Dada - Surrealism', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 18, iss. 1 (Summer 1984), 53.
[87] Lynch, 'Music Videos: From Performance to Dada – Surrealism', 53.
[88] Lynch, 'Music Videos: From Performance to Dada – Surrealism', 53.

striking element in music video is not its sense of narrative closure, but the very opposite process – its pervasive ambiguity'.[89] In this respect, the images making up the music video tend toward the abstract, ambiguous, incoherent and meaningless. Indeed a commonplace observation concerning the music video is 'that the aural element…does *not* work as a *sound track*'.[90] Lynch's article on this phenomenon (published in 1984, not long after the music video emerged) contains a description of the bizarre incoherence between sound and image in a Billy Idol video:

> There may not be any relationship between the way the record sounds and the style of the video. "Eyes Without a Face," by Billy Idol, is a very pleasant ballad when heard on the radio. In the video one is treated to Billy's curled lip, leather and chain costuming and the imagery of Heavy Metal-fire, entrapment and sado-masochism.[91]

It might be said that these comments do not comprehend the entirety of music videos; some certainly do follow the narrative thread of the song and for some the clashing visual element intentionally supplements and enhances our understanding of the song's lyrical content. It can nevertheless be argued that even the most formulaic examples include a level of incoherence or disjuncture between sound and image. Moreover, it seems that this idea of disjuncture between sound and image is a fundamental aspect of the music video's form, because the image-element's original responsibility was merely to provide an excuse to have the song-as-commodity heard.

*Raspberry Poser* has the aesthetic of a music video, in that it uses a sound track that does not work as a sound track to its visual media: its imagery is in no way illustrative of the song. Instead the aural element delivers unity to an array of disjointed images. In this respect, the music video aesthetic seems typical of contemporary screen culture. Indeed the peculiar relationship between sound and image in music videos is also characteristic of contemporary mainstream cinematic tendencies, which replace scenes of Bazinian duration with hyperactive fast cuts and

[89] Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 95.
[90] Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*, 70.
[91] Lynch, 'Music Videos: From Performance to Dada – Surrealism', 54.

non-diegetic imagery.[92] The definitive auteur of this cinema is Michael Bay, whose *Transformers* films of the 2000s and early 2010s have an average shot length of between 3 and 3.4 seconds. Certainly, some of the critical reception of Bay's *Transformers* films suggests that their viewed experience is comparable to music videos, in terms of visual incoherence.[93] For instance, the critic A.D. Jameson explains: 'I frequently suspected that the screenwriter of *Age of Extinction* [the fourth film in the *Transformers* series]…while writing the earlier scenes, had no idea what would later happen in the film…it feels as though the screenwriter had forgotten what occurred earlier on'.[94] He continues, arguing that what's '*lacking is a sense of the whole*. Time and again, priority is given to whatever is happening at the current moment…the films are collections of scenes, unpredictable and arbitrary'.[95] Furthermore, he writes that:

> Little effort seems to have been taken to integrate the looped dialogue with the action. Instead, it frequently sounds disconnected, even arbitrary. As Hound whirls around, firing his guns, John Goodman declares, "I'm a fat ballerina who takes names and slits throats!" Elsewhere he intones, "I'm a wicked warrior robot!" Why does he say either? Who knows? The lines - many of the lines - are entirely *arbitrary*; Hound could say anything, or nothing.[96]

The overwhelming sense of confusion is also expressed in Peter Bradshaw's review of the first film in the series. He protests that 'the editing is frenzied, almost

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[92] Here I'm referring to the 'long-take' style favoured by film theorist André Bazin. In Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwall's *Dictionary of Film Studies* they explain Bazin's enthusiasm for the long or continuous shot, 'on the grounds that they respect the time and space of the profilmic event and thus better convey the complexity of the world and allow the viewer to contemplate the image as it unfolds in time'. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 250.

[93] In fact, Bay launched his directorial career making commercials and music videos; directing, for instance, the video for Meatloaf's *I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)* (1993). This is a familiar career trajectory for directors of mainstream commercial cinema, particularly action cinema. For example: McG, director of *Terminator Salvation* (2009), made music videos for Sugar Ray, Smash Mouth and The Offspring in the 1990s; David Fincher, director of the U.S version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), also made the video for Madonna's *Vogue* in 1990. See Nick Hyman, 'Ranked: Music Video Directors Turned Film Directors', *Metacritic* (August 2010), http://www.metacritic.com/feature/music-video-directors-turned-film-directors, accessed 03/08/15.

[94] A.D. Jameson, 'The Value of Incoherency: Taking Michael Bay's Transformers Films Seriously', *Press Play* (July 2014), http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/the-value-of-incoherency-taking-michael-bays-transformers-films-seriously-20140711?page=3, accessed 13/04/15.

[95] Jameson, 'The Value of Incoherency: Taking Michael Bay's Transformers Films Seriously', http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/the-value-of-incoherency-taking-michael-bays-transformers-films-seriously-20140711?page=3, accessed 13/04/15.

[96] Jameson, 'The Value of Incoherency: Taking Michael Bay's Transformers Films Seriously', http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/the-value-of-incoherency-taking-michael-bays-transformers-films-seriously-20140711?page=3, accessed 13/04/15.

stroboscopic, so much so that you can't really get a clear look at what the Transformers actually look like'.[97] After the press screening of the film, Bradshaw claims that the experience left him and his peers 'suffering from the triple-whammy of tinnitus, blurred vision and sheer resentment'.[98] He then jokes that 'we resembled a coach party outing from the local head injury clinic'.[99] This style of filmmaking has been termed 'chaos cinema' (for obvious reasons) by Mattias Stork, in an influential and critical video-essay published online by *Press Play*.[100] One of the most important features of 'chaos cinema', for Stork, is its use of sound track. This is, for him, the only way the film maintains coherence.

> Considering all the deliberate insanity occurring onscreen, these movies should be totally unintelligible. Yet we still have a faint sense of what's going on.
>
> Why?
>
> Because of the soundtrack… as the visuals in action films have become sloppier, shallower and blurrier, the sound design has become more creative, dense and exact. This is what happens when you lose your eyesight: your other senses try to compensate.[101]

Stork's analysis is based on the premise that pre-'chaos cinema' respected the time and space of the pro-filmic event: images were diegetic and evoked a proper sense of duration. He explains that 'chaos' images 'deliberately limit clarity and increase rapidity to overwhelm, confuse, and thereby "thrill" audiences'.[102] The soundtrack is needed to hold the images together. Bay's post-production audio engineer Greg P.

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[97] Peter Bradshaw, 'Transformers', *The Guardian* (July 2007), http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/jul/27/actionandadventure.sciencefictionandfantasy, accessed 03/08/15.

[98] Bradshaw, 'Transformers', http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/jul/27/actionandadventure.sciencefictionandfantasy, accessed 03/08/15.

[99] Bradshaw, 'Transformers', http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/jul/27/actionandadventure.sciencefictionandfantasy, accessed 03/08/15.

[100] See Mattias Stork, 'CHAOS CINEMA: The decline and fall of action filmmaking', *Press Play* (August 2011), http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/video_essay_matthias_stork_calls_out_the_chaos_cinema, accessed 14/04/15.

[101] Stork, 'CHAOS CINEMA: The decline and fall of action filmmaking', http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/video_essay_matthias_stork_calls_out_the_chaos_cinema, accessed 14/04/15.

[102] Mattias Stork, 'Chaos Cinema: Assaultive Action Aesthetics', *Media Fields Journal,* no. 6 (2013), http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/chaos-cinema/2013/8/6/chaos-cinema-assaultive-action-aesthetics.html, accessed 16/12/15.

Russell, who helped design the soundscape for the *Transformers* series, might be seen to confirm this understanding of 'chaos cinema's' dependence on soundtrack. In an interview with *Variety* magazine he discusses his extensive, and seemingly excessive, process; claiming that 'there are thousands of [sound] choices made in a ten minute piece of the film'.[103] The sound element in contemporary cinema, it seems, is charged with providing the viewer with some sense of orientation in its strange new chaotic spatiality. Indeed, the film theorist Thomas Elsaesser has suggested that 'in the cinema…sound now lead[s]…the image…giving objects a particular kind of solidity and materiality'.[104] Perhaps this aspect of sound is compulsory when the contemporary screen tends towards 'chaos', discontinuity and incoherence. Thus, the music video aesthetic can be seen as an important blueprint for contemporary screen culture: because whilst the chaotic imagery of the music video was a necessary alibi for the song (so it would be listened to), now the song, or soundtrack has become a necessary alibi for the chaotic nature of screen-based visuality.

However, the 'chaos' that these critics have observed in contemporary cinema and the 'chaos' observable more generally in contemporary screen culture is nothing new. Already in 1947, Adorno and the composer Hanns Eisler had remarked upon the importance of the soundtrack in motion pictures. In their co-authored book *Composing for the Films* they focus on the cinematic score, and consider why sound-pictures 'need music'.[105] Their argument, I think, can be productively explored in relation to the pop song's significance in *Raspberry Poser*. For Adorno and Eisler, the sound-picture's synergy of different elements into a naturalistic-seeming whole, has always been a 'fraudulent' and 'fragile' endeavour.[106] They provocatively suggest that if we were to watch a sound-picture without its score, its false representation of the external world would be all too apparent, and it would fail to cohere into a cinematic experience. The film needs music as its supplement:

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[103] Greg P. Russell quoted in 'Variety Artisans: Big Robots, Big Sounds – "Transformers: Age of Extinction"', *Variety* [video interview] (October 2014), available to view at http://variety.com/video/big-robots-big-sounds-transformers-age-of-extinction/, accessed 03/08/15.

[104] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The "Return" of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 39, iss. 2 (Winter 2013), 227.

[105] Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* [1947] (London: The Athalone Press, 1994), 77.

[106] Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 77.

> The photographed picture as such lacks motivation for movement; only indirectly do we realize that the pictures are in motion, that the frozen replica of external reality has suddenly been endowed with the spontaneity that it was deprived of by its fixation, and that something petrified is manifesting a life of its own. At this point, music intervenes, supplying momentum, muscular energy, a sense of corporeity, as it were. Its aesthetic effect is that of a stimulus of motion, not a reduplication of motion…the relation between music and pictures is antithetic at the very moment when the deepest unity is achieved.[107]

This is to imply that the sound-picture, combining image and music, is deceptive. It tricks us into an experience of plenitude because what we are experiencing is a stilted or petrified replication of reality. Thus the sound-picture has always been in some way chaotic (anticipating Stork's 'chaos cinema') and has always needed soundtrack to provide momentum and corporeality. It deceives us into a sense of realism. David Jenemann has connected this critique of cinema to Adorno's more general critique of realism in art (found, for example, in Adorno's 1952 text, *In Search of Wagner*). Jenemann annotates Adorno's line of thinking, explaining that the 'more the artwork strives for realism, the more it distances itself from reality, and the more art tries to approximate life, the more it accommodates itself to the death [or abstraction] of nature'.[108] It is the 'death of nature in the artwork' that enables it to 'enter into the system of exchange as a commodity'.[109] In this reading, music is crucial if the cinematic object is to become a commodity: because it gives a sense of 'realism' (continuity, causality or duration) to the film, which is the best alibi for the 'death of nature' that it conceals.

There is an additional layer of complexity to this understanding of the moving image. Writing with Max Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno commented on the way in which cultural commodities are designed to be 'consumed with alertness even when the customer is distraught'.[110] Adorno and Eisler's account of film music fits this. The music stimulates the consumer to alertness, and precludes their distressed or distracted resistance to the 'fraudulent' object. This is directly counter to the usual model of audience reception of mainstream film that is implied

[107] Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 78.
[108] David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 116.
[109] Jenemann, *Adorno in America*, 116.
[110] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 127.

by those who valorize the sense of critical distance provided by the jolt and shock tactics of avant-garde montage. On Adorno and Horkheimer's account, instead of a passive mode of consumption, the mainstream sound film requires that the spectator 'labors on the broadcast or projection to continually produce the coherent object he has come to expect'.[111] So, in this account, the work or activity of the spectator that was valorised by the avant-garde - their 'awakening' from passivity - in fact serves an ideological purpose. This is the same work that we do when we watch Wolfson's *Raspberry Poser*: labour it into coherence, because it's not coherent. And this is the same work that we have to do when we watch music videos: work for which we have become very well trained. This is testified to, I think, by the experience of watching *Raspberry Poser* and any number of music videos with the sound set to mute: the sense of structure, momentum and libidinal energy suddenly collapses like a house of cards, leaving only fragments and muddled pieces.

Wolfson's desire with *Raspberry Poser* to make a 'party video', or in other words, a music video, is therefore indicative of a desire to reproduce the conditions by which we experience contemporary screen-mediated environments. The requirement, in *Raspberry Poser*, to piece together incoherent image fragments according to a song with which they share no significant historical or material links is an ordinary imperative of everyday life. In this respect, *Raspberry Poser* can be seen as a repetition or mirroring of a montage that has become operational or functional, although not always seen, in our contemporary screen-mediated culture. It can be seen in the solipsistic phenomenon of wearing headphones whilst performing any and all sorts of activity. This is part of the ordinary experience of contemporary city dwellers, who often walk through the streets, geared with headphones providing their own private musical accompaniment. The music works to filter and enhance the environment. In Jean-Paul Thibaud's account of this phenomenon, he suggests that headphone-wearer's environment is 'not apprehended in an equivalent and neutral manner… [but] subjected to choices and visual reconfigurations in terms of headphone listening'.[112] For the listener this transforms the city into a dumb architectonic puppet, which is brought to life according to the whim of whatever

[111] Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 120.
[112] Jean-Paul Thibaud, 'The sonic composition of the city', in Michael Bull and Les Back eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Amsterdam: Berg Publishers, 2003), 336.

song is being played. This montage is also implied in Railton and Watson's comments on the music video's default population of the screens in everyday spaces, such as the shopping mall and the hotel. These spaces are non-places: environments marked by the bland deterritorializing of corporate culture. They are spaces which, in the words of Marc Augé, 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity'.[113] These non-places require us to give coherence to their meaninglessness, and create distinction from their indistinction. The music pouring out of the screens encourages us to labour these uncoded and deterritorialized spaces into pleasurable environments, within which we are happy to carry on consuming. This is the same process, albeit writ large, that takes place when we labour the images of a music video together.

Therefore we can argue that the shocked and cognitively active spectator promoted in avant-garde montage is inherited in our experience of screen-mediated space. But, the process is inverted: here our activity functions to suture ourselves into dominant ideology. It is via this technique that 'on' and 'off' screen spaces are merged, so that the information on the screen that breaks up and fragments our immediate experience of the world appears as one continuous data stream. This complements the marketing and vague metaphors of 'algorithmic governmentality' and 'Big Data,' which, Rouvroy explains, promises to rationalize 'the world [as data] without any kind of mediation (except virtually transparent, almost naturalized computers)'.[114] By this, I mean that the rationalization of the world by data-extracting instruments functions as if 'on' and 'off' screen spaces form one continuous and unmediated data stream. Metaphors of liquidity and fluidity are typically used to symbolise, and naturalise, this imagining of contemporary screen space.

However, the point is that this screen space is not smooth and continuous, but that we labour it into continuity – aided, in part, by energising aural

[113] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, tr. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 77 - 78.

[114] Antoinette Rouvroy, 'Data Without (Any)Body? Algorithmic governmentality as hyper-disadjointment and the role of Law as technical organ', *Abstract for the Conference on General Organology. The Co-Individuation of Minds, Bodies, Social Organizations and Techne* 20-21-22 November 2014, University of Kent, Canterbury UK, https://www.academia.edu/9044828/Data_Without_Body._Algorithmic_governmentality_as_hyper-disadjointment_and_the_role_of_Law_as_technical_organ, accessed 07/07/15.

accompaniments. We can make a bigger claim here, and argue that with the mass adoption of globalizing digital technologies, our historical reality has itself only become more discontinuous and fragmented; or montaged (full of violent juxtapositions) – politically, ecologically, and economically. Crary comes to a similar point in his critique of neoliberal temporality and its information economy, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013): 'In spite of the omnipresent proclamations of the compatibility, even harmonization, between human time and the temporalities of networked systems', he writes, 'the lived realities of this relationship are disjunctions, fractures, and continual disequilibrium'.[115] Technological innovation has long been associated with the corralling of behaviour and exacerbation of socio-economic disparities, and this arguably exploded with the large-scale embrace of digital technologies and co-emergence of 'finance capitalism' in the 1980s (also the period in which we were introduced to the music video). David Harvey, for instance, has argued that '[t]echnologies of knowledge production and dissemination, for data and information storage and retrieval, are crucial for the survival and perpetuation of capital'.[116] Indeed they tend to work in tandem.

Thus, in this present moment – in part characterised by the marketing and implementation of more and more, newer and newer data-producing innovations with inbuilt 'planned obsolescence' (aiding the smooth adaptation of more innovation, as earlier versions are scheduled to self-destruct) - it can be argued that social and economic disparities are enhanced and violent juxtapositions of luxury and poverty are maintained (for instance, the sleek iPhones that rely upon the unregulated mining of coltan in the Democratic Republic of Congo).[117] In this circumstance, data-

[115] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 31.
[116] David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 100.
[117] 'Planned obsolescence' is a term used by Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book *Future Shock*, as part of his analysis of technological advancements. 'Obsolescence', he explains, 'occurs when some new product arrives on the scene to perform these functions more effectively than the old product could. The new antibiotics do a more effective job of curing infection than the old. The new computers are infinitely faster and cheaper to operate than the antique models of the early 1960s. This is obsolescence due to substantive technological advance'. See Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 67. Nowadays, obsolescence is widely considered an inbuilt feature of our everyday devices. Rosie Spinks, in a 2015 article published in *The Guardian* writes: 'Once we own a new device, we often can't replace its batteries or take it to an independent repair shop for a simple fix. In fact, proprietary screws on Ale products often prevent us from opening Ale devices at all. It's standard practice for companies to plan obsolescence into their products — including by introducing

producing technological innovations are enthusiastically embraced because they help to render this 'risk'-laden and fragmented world predictable – postponing our reflection upon social, political, ecological and economic disparities by plunging us into the illusion of a dynamic real-time. The subsequent experience of this discontinuous and chaotic world as a continuous or smooth, screen-mediated composition is also implicated in Crary's theorisation of the *24/7* temporality of the new economy. He writes that:

> One of the goals of Google, Facebook, and other enterprises (five years from now the names may be different) is to normalize and make indispensable…the idea of a continuous interface - not literally seamless, but a relatively unbroken engagement with illuminated screens of diverse kinds that unremittingly demand interest or response. Of course, there are breaks, but they are not intervals in which any kind of counter-projects or streams of thought can be nurtured and sustained. As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion.[118]

The 'chaotic' nature of digital imagery in contemporary cinema and current screen space seems to echo the temporality of electronic '24/7' capital. Indeed we might understand it as a visual correlate to the unregulated electronic flow of unintelligible financial transactions, initiating us to its new temporality: a 'continuous present' that disavows the nurturing of resistance and the sustained imagining of any alternative. How, therefore, can we understand Wolfson's repetition of this type of imagery (a repetition of the representational formats that seem to typify contemporary 24/7 capitalism) and negation of more explicit Eisensteinian montage techniques?

## liquid mirror

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software upgrades that aren't compatible with existing hardware — and they simultaneously profit from the fact that the average laptop has a high likelihood of breaking within 3-4 years'. Spinks also describes the environmental impact of this inbuilt feature: 'Consumers aren't the only losers here, the environment is too. Due to a lack of clear economic incentives and methods, globally only 12% of smartphone upgrades involve older devices being sold or traded for the new one. This means ecologically damaging devices end up languishing in drawers and eventually landfills'. Thus, the process also further supports the unregulated mining of minerals, such as coltan. See Rosie Spinks, 'We're all losers to a gadget industry built on planned obsolescence', *The Guardian* (March 2015), http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/mar/23/were-are-all-losers-to-gadget-industry-built-on-planned-obsolescence, accessed 05/08/15.

[118] Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 75.

In a 2013 exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, *Raspberry Poser* was shown on a large screen in a darkened space with bright white carpets. This worked to create a very physical experience, as the light from the film seemed to pour from the screen, staining the immediate environment like an illuminated LCD laptop screen in the dark (fig. 4.7). Wolfson explained in an interview with the gallery that the 'white carpet reflects the light in the video in a profound way. It will constantly change the colour of the space and reflect back into the space. When the video goes black ideally the space also becomes very dark and when it goes white the space brightens. When it goes red the space becomes red'.[119] This produced a sense of the screen's space extending out into the environment, blurring the boundaries between 'on' and 'off' screen. This interest of Wolfson's in the liquidity of the screen - its light washing over the environment and immersing the viewer in a sort of digital bath - is reflective of the dominant commercial rhetoric used in the marketing of contemporary screens. For instance, at the time of writing, Sony's latest television screen is branded with the tagline 'Forget you're watching TV'. Its advertisement explains that with 'four times more detail than Full HD, 4K gives stunningly natural images, not pixels. Dramatically higher image quality means that you can sit closer to the screen, filling more of your field of view until the screen disappears'.[120] And in a television advert for the 'Samsung Galaxy Note 4' mobile phone the narrator informs us that 'this is not a screen, it's a window'.[121] Moreover the recent trend by numerous electronics companies to manufacture curved television screens hints at a similarly pleasurable conquest of the spectator. These screens promise to wrap around their viewer in a pleasing embrace and flood their material world with 'stunningly natural' image-information; as seen, for example, in a current advertisement for the Samsung S9W Series 9 Curved SUHD 4K Nano Crystal Smart TV (fig. 4.8).[122]

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[119] Jordan Wolfson in 'Interview with Jordan Wolfson', gallery handout for *Jordan Wolfson,* at the Chisenhale Gallery (29 November–2 February 2014), available online at http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/images/JW_artist_sheet.pdf, accessed 23/10/14.

[120] See http://www.sony.co.uk/electronics/televisions/x9500b-series, accessed 10/10/14.

[121] See Todd Haselton, 'Galaxy Note 4 Ads Show Off Awesome New Features', *Techno Buffalo* (October 2014), http://www.technobuffalo.com/2014/10/08/galaxy-note-4-ads-show-off-awesome-new-features/, accessed 27/10/14

[122] In a review of curved-screen technology in *Forbes* magazine, John Archer emphasises a heightened sense of immersion that seems to collapse the 'real world' with the world displayed on the

Wolfson's strategy is passive. He passively repeats the screen's pleasurably depolarized forms of representation and he passively indulges in its commercial language and vague metaphors of liquidity. In this sense, I want to claim that he constructs a dead montage - by this, I mean to differentiate his work from the more positive, or vital idea of montage that is referenced by Manovich, Väliaho and Toscano. In their accounts, montage's purported obsolescence in relation to new media technologies keeps it active in a 'critical' sense. Indeed, building on Benjamin's discussion of outmoded technologies such as magic lanterns and stereoscopic slides, Rosalind Krauss has argued that once outmoded, these technologies 'can brush the phantasmagorical against its own grain to produce an outside to the totality of technologized space'.[123] Thus the obsolescent has a history of conceptualisation in critical theory as a form of resistance that produces value outwith the normal temporality of capitalist production and through which one can find an alternative use or transgressive critical value. However, Wolfson's *Raspberry Poser* does not engage with montage as an obsolescent technique, seeking to reactivate it. His use of montage is non-productive in that it does not uncover or reveal or attempt to produce an outside to 'technologized space'. Instead it is dead: an avant-garde technique that is beyond redemption and unable to produce anything or compete with technologized space. How are we to understand this very passive or indifferent aesthetic? What is at stake in Wolfson's representation of montage in this truly negative fashion?

For some commentators, the most striking aspect of *Raspberry Poser* is its use of animation, which brings together computer-generated elements with more traditional hand-drawn style cartoon animation. Linda Norden suggests that, in this respect, *Raspberry Poser* 'owes something…[to] Disney (as well as Ben Shahn and George

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screen: 'When you look at the real world you don't perceive it as just a flat "screen". The rounded nature of your eyeballs gives you peripheral vision too, so that you're aware of the world extending around you to your sides. By curving the edges of their pictures toward you, curved TVs try to replicate this sense of a world to the side of as well as in front of you, making you feel more immersed in what you're watching'. See John Archer, 'Curved TVs: 6 Reasons You Should Buy One--And 6 More Why You Shouldn't', *Forbes* (August 2014), http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnarcher/2014/08/13/curved-tvs-6-reasons-you-should-buy-one-and-6-more-why-you-shouldnt/, accessed 22/12/14.

[123] Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 25 (Winter 1999), 304.

Grosz)'.[124] Similarly, Andrew Goldstein describes the work as a 'looping 14-minute melange of Disney-style animation'.[125] Indeed the film features a range of animated cartoon sequences that seem to adhere to Gilbert Seldes's enthusiastic reception of early cartoons, which convey a 'pleasure in magic, in seeing the impossible happen'.[126] Wolfson's cartoons display various impossible transformations, metamorphoses and absurd, weird happenings. For instance, there is a recurring cartoon character (who resembles the Beano's *Dennis the Menace*, but with red hair) who, at one point grins and plunges a large knife into his abdomen, slicing down, allowing his ribcage to splay open. At other times he silently screams and gesticulates wildly before pulling off his skin like a snake, leaving a hole of black negative space on screen. And at another point, he is shown in a sort of yoga pose whilst, at the same time, strangling himself (fig. 4.9). His body stretches and stretches like a rubber band until he appears to die: his tongue rolls out and eyes are voided with a black cross in that familiar cartoon representation of death. Moreover in interview, Wolfson has expressed his interest in the cartoon's altered conception of reality, which offers 'another set of permissions and existences'.[127] In this semse, I want to suggest, it is possible to identify the influence of the Fleischer Studios in *Raspberry Poser's* cartoons. The Fleischer Studios were Disney's first significant competitor in the 1920s and 1930s; creators of, amongst others, Betty Boop, Bimbo the dog and Popeye. Their distinctive early style of animation was defined by transformations, morphing forms, an uncompromising vitalism (where anything and

[124] Linda Norden, 'Only the Lonely', in Aram Moshayedi ed., *Jordan Wolfson: Ecce Homo/le Poseur* (Köln: Walther König, 2013), 52.

[125] Andrew Goldstein, 'Jordan Wolfson on Transforming the 'Pollution' of Pop Culture Into Art', *Artspace* (April 2014), http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/jordan_wolfson_interview, accessed 20/10/14.

[126] Gilbert Seldes quoted in Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1982), 12.

[127] Wolfson makes these comments in an interview with the Kadist Art Foundation, Paris. See 'Kadiview with Jordan Wolfson', *Kadist Paris* (2011), http://vimeo.com/54768312, accessed 23/10/14. In my own conversation with the artist, he cites the familiar Warner Brothers *Looney Tune* 'Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner', whose recurring motif sees Wile E. Coyote accidentally running off the edge of a cliff, without realising that the ground has fallen away. The Coyote carries on running in mid-air for a period of time before falling. Wolfson continued to describe his art-making process in similar terms; as like jumping off a cliff. He opined that contemporary art had become stale; too reliant upon institutionally grounded markers of value. Instead he wanted to remove the ground, throwing himself, and the viewers of his work, off a cliff - providing an experience with 'another set of permissions'. Wolfson, Skype conversation with author, 04/03/15.

everything – e.g. plants, doorknobs, record players, and windows – might all of a sudden take on an autonomous life force of its own) and a general sense of unboundedness from the laws of physical reality (fig. 4.10). Indeed this sensibility distinguished their style from Disney, who more characteristically privileged a naturalistic approach to animation. In his book *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (2004), Norman M. Klein explains that Disney's production methods endorsed some very exacting directions: 'According to the Disney rule, once a character's body was shown – rubbery, watery, human-like – that substance was irreducible (no hesitation or lapse). Walt was convinced', Klein continues, 'that revealing the drawing behind the flesh could wreck the atmospheric effects that he prized so highly'.[128] It follows that 'Donald or Goofy can be made to bulge and implode, but never lose their "personality"'.[129] By contrast, with the Fleischer style of animation, Klein writes that '[g]ravity itself seems to disappear. Laws of what goes up cease. An uncanny antilogic assumes control. Objects lose substance: they become mercurial. Flesh, or metal, flows like water…'[130]

There is one sequence in *Raspberry Poser* that particularly interests me, and in which a reference to the Fleischer style is unmistakeable. The cartoon boy appears again, this time holding an artefact of the previous era: a magic hand-mirror, recognizable from the Fleischers' 1933 animation, *Betty Boop's Snow White* (famous for its rotoscoping of Cab Calloway as the Koko the Clown character). Wolfson's cartoon kid pulls the mirror over his head like a hoop, the screen cuts, and he returns a second later, transformed into a chair. The chair then grows spikes (fig. 4.11). This bizarre scene is repeated a few seconds later. In *Betty Boop's Snow White* the magic mirror grows stubby arms and, of course, reveals a talking face in order to answer the queen's question as to 'who is the fairest in the land'. The queen later runs the mirror over her body like a hoop - revealing the original gesture that is repeated by Wolfson

[128] Norman M. Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (New York; London: The New Press, 2004), 254.
[129] Klein draws attention to the early Disney cartoon *The Band Concert* (1935), which clearly illustrates this procedure. Here Mickey Mouse plays a band leader, conducting an orchestra when a tornado strikes. Despite the violence of this natural disaster, Mickey manages to stay intact and stick to his job whilst the orchestra stays on beat. Klein comments that Mickey's 'dogged refusal to morph was the central gag of the cartoon'. Disney's commitment to the naturalistic illusion of animation was thus allegorically present within their cartoons. See Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects,* 254 – 255.
[130] Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, 250.

- and transforms into a witch (fig. 4.12). Later still, she runs the mirror over Betty's accomplice, Koko the Clown, turning him into a strange stilt-legged and shape-shifting ghost with a body like a rubber band who sings 'St. James Infirmary Blues'. The ghost twists and ties itself into knots and has a very fluid relationship to its context: transforming, for instance, according to the song's lyrical content. Koko becomes a twenty-dollar gold piece on a chain and then his head becomes a bottle from which he pours a 'shot of that booze', before throwing it down his own exposed neck cavity. Unlike Disney, these bulging and imploding cartoon characters have no personality to lose. Their personality is forever in flux. The mirror, which is seemingly responsible for these extreme morphs and transformations, can be seen as a surrogate for the medium of animation, which as Seldes claimed, could make 'the impossible happen'. The mirror in *Raspberry Poser* is visually identical – indeed, it is as the artist verbally confirmed to me, in direct homage to the Fleischer cartoon - and Wolfson employs it to similar metamorphic effect: the mirror's surface seemingly losing its substance, becoming mercurial, and transforming the boy into a chair.[131] Thus *Raspberry Poser* might be seen to inherit this older model of animation as a transformative mirroring of reality. The 'magic' mirror reference would seem to affirm such a sentiment. The animated mirror produces a distorted reflection of the world, by pulling us through its tain. This is its function in the Fleischer version of *Snow White*. Indeed (whilst not directly mentioning the mirror) Klein interprets the strange transformations that take place in the cartoon as a sort of exaggerated reflection of material and historical conditions: it's 'about uncertainty – modernity and the Depression as the Fleischer team witnessed it', he writes: here 'the animator builds social imaginaries about collective anxiety'.[132]

The aesthetic of fluidity and liquidity invoked in Klein's reception of the cartoon, which seems to redeem and liberate the Fleischer style from the normative conventions of Disney - whose cartoons, in this understanding, ultimately reinforced

[131] Wolfson explains in conversation that: 'With the mirror, I was thinking a lot about generic cartoon actions of distortion…the mirror can actually be cited as a reference to the Fleischer Brothers in a Cab Calloway animation, in which he takes a mirror and turns into a skeleton. In mine the kid turns into a chair, and then spikes come out of the chair'. The artist also mentions, lending further significance to this motif, that: 'I actually have that [mirror] tattooed on my chest'. Wolfson, Skype conversation with author, 04/03/15.
[132] Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, 260.

dominant social narratives - is premised on a conception of the mirror that can be seen to correspond to the feminist thinker Luce Irigary's discussion of mirrors. In the 1970s Irigaray used the motif of the mirror, and the idea of passing through its surface, as part of her critique of the prevailing patriarchal 'scopic economy'. This drew upon Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, *Behind the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), in which a world is revealed on the other side of the mirror where language collapses.[133] Glossing Irigaray's interest in this motif, Carolyn Burke describes its 'ideological space beyond the psychic economy of patriarchy', which is structured by a 'mechanics of fluids' rather than a 'mechanics of solids'.[134] In this respect, Irigaray's thinking about the mirror contains some similarity with the critical reception of early animation, in particular the Fleischer style and its 'uncanny antilogic' of 'mercurial' substances. Her vivid description of the 'mechanics of fluids' is of most interest here:

> That it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible…That it is unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable; that it enjoys and suffers from a greater sensitivity to pressures; that it changes – in volume or in force, for example – according to the degree of heat; that it is, in its physical reality, determined by friction between two infinitely neighbouring entities – dynamics of the near and not of the proper, movements coming from the quasi contact between two unities hardly definable as such…and not energy of a finite system…that it mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogeneous manner, which makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical; and furthermore that it is already diffuse "in itself," which disconcerts any attempt at static identification.[135]

The emancipatory register of Irigaray's text suggests a world of viscous materiality: of contingency, transformations, immanence and general malleability. This is

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[133] Irigaray's *This Sex which is not one* (1977) opens with the following epigraph taken from Carroll's novel, describing the discombobulating moment immediately after Alice has passed through the glass: '…she suddenly began again. "Then it really has happened, after all." And now, who am I? I will remember, if I can! I'm determined to do it!" But being determined didn't help her much, and all she could say, after a great deal of puzzling, was: "L, I know it begins with L."' Lewis Carroll quoted in Luce Irigaray, 'The Looking Glass from the Other Side', *This Sex which is not one*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 9. Carolyn Burke explains the significance of this scene for Irigaray; for here things suddenly 'have no name. The rules of logic do not yet prevail, for no name-bestowing Adam is present'. Carolyn Burke, 'Irigaray through the Looking Glass', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer, 1981), 299.

[134] Burke, 'Irigaray through the Looking Glass', 296.

[135] Irigaray, 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids', *This Sex which is not one*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 111.

paralleled, I think, in Klein's description of the morphing figures in the Fleischer cartoons, which 'look unstable, in hesitation, on a journey into antimatter, where many atmospheres meet'.[136] For Irigaray, this talk of 'fluidity' formed part of a project to conceptualise a 'plural' and 'polymorphous' idea of 'women'; free from the 'psychic economy of patriarchy'.[137] For Klein, the 'mechanics of fluidity' that emerged in the Fleisher cartoons was part of a new visual language that imagined some form of liberation from the drudgery and order of everyday life in post-war American Fordism.

However, the mirror in *Raspberry Poser* does not enable this type of emancipatory narrative. It does not reveal a new perspective or altered view of historical reality. By contrast, the mirror in *Raspberry Poser* can be understood as a surrogate for the screen, mirroring its distinctive spatiality. And the distortions that seem ostensibly equivalent to the Fleischer cartoons are more simply synonymous with the distortions that result from a depolarized screen space. The contemporary screen normalizes the 'mechanics of fluids' that contributed to the emancipatory aesthetics of Irigarary and Klein. Here, by contrast, we have a 'functionality of fluids'. This expresses the screen's illusory world of liquidity, immersion and dynamic interconnectivity. In this sense, Wolfson's passive mirroring of this world and its logic can be better interpreted according to the mirror motif employed by Adorno in his writing on the bourgeois interior.

A small subsection of Adorno's *habilitation* thesis, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (published in 1933, the same year as the Fleischer's *Betty Boop's Snow White*) focuses on the 'window mirror'. Adorno examines this device as part of a wider discussion of the bourgeois *intérieur* in Kierkegaard's writing, in which he criticizes as inherently bourgeois the aspiration to isolate oneself from the capitalist process (as Kierkegaard famously did, to the extent that he refused to 'put his money out to interest').[138] The 'window mirror' emblematised this point: it was a popular

[136] Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects,* 259.
[137] In a 1982 interview Irigaray explained: 'I don't particularly care for the term feminism. It is a word by which the social system designates the struggle of women…I prefer to say the struggles of women, which reveals a plural and polymorphous character'. Quoted in interview with Lucienne Serrano and Elaine Hoffman Baruch 'Luce Irigaray', in Janet Todd ed., *Women Writers Talking*, (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983), 233.
[138] Roland Boer explains that Kierkegaard's inheritance allowed him 'to work on his own in a room isolated from the outside', and that his 'apparent rejection of capitalism' also included the refusal 'to

nineteenth-century gadget that passively projected an image from the outside world into the living room, for the private enjoyment of the occupant. It would be common in the *intérieur* of those who, like Kierkegaard (as a 'rentier'), lived off an inheritance and were able to work isolated from the outside world with pretensions that they were separate from the capitalist mode of production. These devices were appropriately called, Adorno notes, 'spies'.[139] The observer of the mirror, divided from the outside world, is in Adorno's words, a 'private person, solitary, inactive, and separated from the economic processes of production'.[140] The window-mirror 'casts into the apartment only the semblance of things' and testifies to the 'isolated privacy' of the observer'.[141] The 'semblance' that the mirror projects in Adorno's discussion of this process is an 'endless row of apartment buildings into the isolated bourgeois living room…[And] by the mirror, the living room dominates the reflected row at the same time that it is delimited by it'.[142] At this point reality 'comes into focus as a mere commodity'.[143] This spectral return of the outside world inside the bourgeois living room leads Adorno to suggest that the 'harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself from the heteronomous, indeterminate, or simply mean world, the more clearly the external world expresses itself.'[144] So the 'window mirror' does more than passively reflect. In this situation it produces a double vision, whereby the viewer also sees themselves viewing, perhaps enabling a heightened and uncomfortable sense of self-consciousness or even sense of embarrassment at their own pretentiousness. Thus the private subject who retreats into the *intérieur* is broken when an image of capital is projected into their private space by the mirror, destroying their pretence of isolation. Moreover, Adorno's description, I think, is funny. Why? He exposes the ridiculous fact that we would rather watch a representation on a screen (here a mirror) than the real thing – something both tragic and comedic, which seems intrinsic to us. And unlike Plato's famous 'Allegory of

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put his money out to interest'. Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 405.

[139] Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* [1933], tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 42.

[140] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic,* 42.

[141] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 42.

[142] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 42.

[143] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 39.

[144] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic,* 38.

the Cave', this figure in the living room is not chained in and forced to watch, by contrast, the individual is comfortable, relaxed and wants to be there watching a dumb projection of the outside street on the wall.

The world reflected by the mirror into the living room appears, Adorno suggests, 'with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape'.[145] Therefore the reflected world appears as if on the edge of death, at its worst.[146] It is estranged from any sort of 'natural' state and instead appears reified, as a commodity - organized according to an abstract principle of exchange. This principle, Adorno has written, 'dominates human needs and replaces them', as an 'illusion [that] dominates reality'.[147] In this understanding, the passivity of the window-mirror leads to a sense of awareness or self-consciousness of this fact. It is this sort of mirroring that can be seen to take place in *Raspberry Poser*: it mirrors our screen-mediated reality, making it appear at its worst: inverting the emancipatory 'mechanics of fluidity' (mentioned in Irigaray's writing) and instead representing a 'functionality of fluidity'. Perhaps we can claim the same process for *Raspberry Poser*; the work of art, in its passive reflection, is like an Adornian magic mirror, pulling the world through its tain and estranging it from its so-called natural state - so that it appears at its worst. Furthermore, we can claim that this passive reflection, or repetition, produces the same heightened or even comedic sense of self-consciousness as the window-mirror does for Adorno. When watching and enjoying the procession of incoherent and chaotic images in *Raspberry Poser*, we are like the individual in the bourgeois *intérieur*; participating in the dumb and depressing protocols of contemporary screen space, which compels us to find continuity and pleasure in a database aesthetic. In this respect, I want to claim that *Raspberry Poser* is, like Adorno's description of the window mirror, funny.

Comedy has long been seen as a 'mirror of life', specifically associated with

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[145] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic,* 54.

[146] A translator's note cites a description of the 'facies hiocratica' by Frances Adams. 'This countenance, suffering from "the worst," is marked by a "sharp nose, hollow eyes, collapsed temples, the ears cold, contracted, and their lobes turned out: the skin about the forehead being rough, distended and parched; the color of the whole face being green, black, livid, or lead coloured."' See Francis Adams quoted in Robert Hullot-Kentor's notes to Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 152.

[147] Theodor Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research [1957]', published in Adorno et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, tr. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1977), 80.

making things appear shoddier than we immediately presume. Aristotle, for instance, argued that comedy 'aims at representing men as worse…than in actual life'.[148] This 'worseness' is something that we recognise in ourselves and in other things, but is at the same time beneath the 'level of goodness' that we would admit.[149] Certainly this was the case with cartoons according to Adorno and Horkheimer, which were popular because audiences were able to identify with the pathetic situations and absurd characters on screen. 'Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life', they argue, 'get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own beating'.[150] Benjamin comes to a similar, albeit more ambiguous point in a 1931 conversation with Gustav Gluck and Kurt Weill, published as 'Mickey Mouse (fragment)' (in some of his writings animation has a therapeutic function; this led to much disagreement with Adorno).[151] Here he compares Mickey Mouse to someone working in an office and suggests that 'the explanation for the huge popularity of these films…is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them'.[152] The cartoon reflects and repeats aspects of the audience's life in a way that appears funny or stupid, and by extension, makes their own life appear funny or stupid. The double vision that results - whereby reality appears both terrible and ridiculous - is a significant aspect of the theorisation of humour that I want to develop in this thesis. This double, or multiple vision moreover, seems significant with regards to Wolfson's exploration of the screen in *Raspberry Poser*, which to a certain extent simply appears to repeat the representational protocols of screen space.

## comedy

[148] Aristotle in S. H. Butcher ed., *The Poetics of Aristotle* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 11.
[149] Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, 11.
[150] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 138.
[151] Esther Leslie discusses Benjamin's relationship to Mickey Mouse and his correspondence on the subject with Adorno in *Hollywood Flatlands*. For Benjamin, Mickey Mouse represented an unmasking of 'social negativity'. Leslie explains that in Benjamin's thinking 'Disney's cartoon world outlines this world of impoverished and brutal experience - as Adorno and Horkheimer, too, would later underscore in analyses of Donald Duck and the culture industry. But, importantly, its projection is educative and enlightening...The mouse portrays, unmasks and makes available for criticism'. Its therapeutic function is understood as 'a grim and mimetic humour…[providing a] safe release from daily collective experience'. See Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and The Avant-Garde*, 80 – 122.
[152] Walter Benjamin, 'Mickey Mouse (fragment)' [1931], in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith eds., *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1931* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 545.

The unifying, generic convention of the comic, for Scott Cutler Shershow, is 'the clash of incongruous modes of thought and feeling'.[153] Unlike classic montage, these clashes are not resolved into a conceptual unity; by contrast, the 'comic spirit' holds these multiple categories in an antagonistic tension - offering a 'two-faced approach to "reality"'.[154] In this respect, Shershow explains, comedy 'conveys an ideological vision in its malice and intolerance…a vision that expresses the ruling assumptions, the convenient rationalizations, of a particular historical moment'.[155] Thus understood, the simple act of saying or making apparent the fact that 'these are the conditions that prevail', or that 'these are our ruling assumptions', or that 'these are our social customs', can end up mocking those conditions, assumptions and customs. What Shershow calls the 'comic spirit' 'locks us in familiar cages but at the same time holds out the promise of a threshold'.[156] Therefore the 'comic spirit' indicates a threshold to the prevailing ideology not by proposing a solution or a way out, but instead by mocking it, not taking it seriously. Indeed this particular aspect of the comic, emerging from repetition, can be observed in Jean Paul Sartre's comments on the condition of 'seriality' that defines our social customs. Whilst Sartre does not invoke the comic as part of this discussion, the blunt or depressing tenor of his writing, to my mind, nonetheless evokes a 'deadpan' comedic effect similar to that previously mentioned in Adorno.[157] In this respect, we might describe a section on 'seriality' in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) as comically 'two-faced'.

For Sartre, 'seriality' describes the way in which our practical social structures forge us into isolated and yet conforming, homogenous individuals: into a 'plurality of isolation'.[158] For instance, he provides the example of the 'series' of people in a bus queue (he also writes about the serial nature of being stuck in traffic, shopping at

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[153] Scott Cutler Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 53.
[154] Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy,* 27.
[155] Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy,* 27.
[156] Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy,* 27.
[157] The 'deadpan' style of comedy, referring to a flat or emotionless face, describes a dry and direct style of delivery that is not overtly humorous or ironic. Instead, as Aron Vinegar explains in his essay on 'Ed Ruscha, Heidegger and Deadpan Photography', the deadpan approach is a mode of delivery 'that seems emotionally detached or "neutral" in the sense that it does not make outright judgments, and thus tends to emphasize what might be called an "evidentiary" condition'. It is in this respect that the deadpan achieves comedic effect. See Aron Vinegar, 'Ed Ruscha, Heidegger and Deadpan Photography', *Art History*, vol. 32, no. 5 (December 2009), 854.
[158] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* [1960], tr. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 256.

the supermarket and listening to the radio). 'These people', he writes, 'do not care about or speak to each other and, in general, they do not look at one another; they exist side by side alongside a bus stop'.[159] In series, individuals are passive and unwilling to overcome the tension that is posed by the co-existence of their isolation and plurality (instead, Sartre writes, they busy themselves by reading the paper; now more likely they look at their phones). Sartre's discussion is related to the idea of class consciousness, or the difficulty of class consciousness in modern society, as such social structures necessitate our isolation, forcing us to 'face each other as competitors [as opposed to collectives] in the life of survival'.[160] Indeed, Sartre explains that from afar the bus queue might appear unified: a reciprocal group of like-minded and collectivised individuals. This is, however, an illusion because the people in the group are merely 'identical instances of the same act'.[161] The 'social ensemble' that queues together is not, what Sartre terms, a 'rich, differentiated synthesis' of reciprocal interests. It is, by contrast, an 'abstract generality' whose coherence is determined purely by the bus schedule, which organises the participants according to 'their interchangeability'.[162] This means that, in this situation, the individual gives the impression of a comically dumb object, whose agency is fully, and therefore absurdly determined by the bus company. In his interpretation of Sartre's concept of radio broadcasting and the 'political impotence' of its listeners, Joseph S. Catalano invokes a similarly comical image of the radio listener pitifully talking back to their radio, as if it could respond.[163] 'The broadcaster's voice', he writes, 'appears to speak to us and invite us to reciprocal relation; but this reciprocity is false'.[164]

At the same time, Catalano, writing in 2010, holds out hope for the internet's 'power to alter our political impotence' - as if it could overcome our condition of 'seriality'.[165] However, it seems that the opposite is true. With broadcast radio we are 'constituted in our interchangeability' because of our passivity, or inability to

[159] Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* 256.
[160] Joseph S. Catalano, *Reading Sartre* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55.
[161] Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* 262.
[162] Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* 265.
[163] Catalano, *Reading Sartre*, 56.
[164] Catalano, *Reading Sartre*, 56.
[165] Catalano, *Reading Sartre*, 55.

genuinely respond to and interact with the broadcaster's voice. Now we might say that we are 'constituted in our interchangeability' because of our activity: our ability to constantly broadcast our own voices. It is in this aspect that 'seriality' continues in the present day. The system of screens stimulates our continuous engagement, forcing us to act impulsively and unthinkingly, organising us into 'serial' social roles that keep us productive in the new economy. This 'serial' social form is related to the tracking and recording of user behaviour by 'Big Data' companies, which call for the non-selective collection of as much statistical data as possible. One of the implications of this process is that any kind of impulse in the user (which might previously have been considered too idiosyncratic to record) can be detected, logged and subsequently marketed at. We are thus encouraged and given the tools to constantly broadcast ourselves, and our slightest desires. Rouvroy argues that this process is fundamental to 'algorithmic governmentality', and happens at the expense of the individual's ability to 'revise their first-order preferences'.[166] This means that our impulse control is negated by screen technologies because services like Google track and record our impulse clicks and build our profiles from these. It is this data that helps determine internet search prompts, the adverts we see and high hit websites. The repercussion of this screen culture is that we are building a mirror image of our most regressive, simple and impulsive selves. In short, for Rouvory, these technologies employed by 'algorithmic governmentality' are reversing our achievement of 'autonomy'.[167]

Thus understood, the screen excludes any sense of negativity because in its space no aesthetic form seems to clash with any other, nothing is reflected on critically and

[166] Rouvroy, 'Data Without (Any)Body? Algorithmic governmentality as hyper-disadjointment and the role of Law as technical organ', paper delivered at the *Conference on General Organology. The Co-Individuation of Minds, Bodies, Social Organizations and Techne* 20-21-22 November 2014, University of Kent, Canterbury UK, available to view at http://nootechnics.org/video/, accessed 17/08/15.

[167] Rouvroy references Gerald Dworkin's definition of 'autonomy' to describe what is lost with algorithmic governmentality. This is summarised as the 'second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires and wish…and the capacity to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values'. Someone is autonomous, in this sense, if they can identify themselves not only according to their desires and impulses but rather with 'the *motivations* behind those desires and impulses'; thereby, allowing them to reflect critically upon their 'first-order preferences'. See Rouvroy, 'Data Without (Any)Body? Algorithmic governmentality as hyper-disadjointment and the role of Law as technical organ', http://nootechnics.org/video/, accessed 17/08/15, and Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14-15.

all complexity or ambivalence is exorcised from the system because it is not conducive to its data-driven consumerism. This algorithmic system is precisely anticipated in Baudrillard's account of 'the political economy of the sign', which describes a situation where all 'ambivalence is reduced by equivalence':[168]

> All the drives, symbolic relations, object relations and even perversions – in short, all the subject's *labor* of cathexis – are abstracted and given their general equivalent…Everything surging from the subject, his body and his desire, is dissociated and catalysed in terms of needs, more or less specified in advance by objects. All instincts are rationalized, finalized and objectified in needs – hence symbolically cancelled.[169]

Wolfson's film mirrors this. Indeed it seems to delight in it. It is a montage that doesn't attempt to subvert, transgress or oppose because these traditionally avant-garde strategies of resistance have been depolarized like everything else. Instead its montage mirrors the peculiar montage that is contemporary screen space, thus appearing as a dead montage - unproductive, useless and in this respect funny. *Raspberry Poser* seems to adopt the negativity of the comic - that is in witnessing the 'face of reality' with a multiple, unfixed and incoherent vision: facing the world with what Shershow describes as 'a constantly shifting perspective of mockery, derision, resignation, and praise'.[170] In this sense, the seemingly passive mirroring and non-oppositional approach adopted in *Raspberry Poser* appears to embrace the movement of what Baudrillard calls a 'double spiral', mentioned previously in the Introduction as a potential model for a new critical imagination that does not fall back on modernist tropes. The 'double spiral' accounts for the inseparability of oppositional categories, which run throughout Baudrillard's writing; for instance, production and seduction, political economy and death, hyper-reality and symbolic exchange, the fatal and the banal, appearance and disappearance. 'It means there is no static opposition, no binary system that functions *ad libitum* from beginning to end'.[171] Instead the idea of the 'double spiral' suggests that these forms all haunt one another, allowing for the possibility of reversibility because there is 'no static

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[168] Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* tr. Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 135.
[169] Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 135.
[170] Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy,* 34.
[171] Jean Baudrillard, '"Baudrillard: The Interview" Interview with Monique Arnaud and Mike Gane' in ed. Mike Gane, *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 202.

opposition…What is interesting', Baudrillard writes, 'is that notions and concepts criss-cross each other, slide into each other, melt into each other'.[172] There is no reconciliation, construction or synthesis with the notions and concepts tied together in a 'double spiral' because the logic of the 'double spiral' is 'sworn to radical antagonism'.[173] Indeed, the 'double spiral' seems to describe the 'fearful symmetry' Shershow recognises in the comic spirit, which holds together incongruous modes of thought and feeling, allowing it to swirl between 'realism and fantasy, cynicism and optimism, ideology and utopia'.[174]

This, I think, clarifies the aesthetic form of *Raspberry Poser*, in which there is no construction of an idea, no clear form of knowledge production, no resolution or dialectical synthesis of images: only a swirling accumulation and disaccumulation of incongruous elements. For this reason, *Raspberry Poser* is emblematic of contemporary screen space and, crucially, reiterates its norms; making it incongruous and funny at the same time. We might see this, more generally, as a blueprint for all the visual culture highlighted in this thesis, in which expressions of stupidity, pessimism and horror emerge as figures of passivity, but thereby also present a powerful negativity, in which we can begin to apprehend a critical imagination that does not fall back on the functionalised and implicitly productive language of the avant-garde, which is so often premised on agency rather than passivity. Indeed, as I have shown, the technological systems of Control have the tendency to exorcise and de-vitalise or de-differentiate the avant-garde's cultivation of otherness, transgression, alterity and criticality by subsuming these forms within the general flow of data. And, such is our mediation by these systems, we are no longer 'cognitively emancipated' or 'awakened' by traditional forms of criticality, which now struggle to genuinely survive.

In these circumstances passive mirroring emerges as a potentially comic device, as I hope to have shown here. And yet, it might seem that this appeal to the comic impulse is inherently conservative: a therapeutic and temporary indulgence in cynical humour that allows one to return refreshed to the smoothly running and well-oiled

[172] Baudrillard, '"Baudrillard: The Interview" Interview with Monique Arnaud and Mike Gane', 202.
[173] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* [1983], tr. Philie Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 25.
[174] Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy,* 26 – 27.

system of production that surrounds us - what Adorno and Horkheimer have memorably termed a 'medicinal bath'.[175] In this understanding, this sort of fun can only ever be 'a parody of humanity'.[176]

Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the comic represents a criticism of the philosopher Henri Bergson's influential *Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1914), in which comedy is accorded a vital or emancipatory energy that has the capacity to burst through and innervate the mechanisation of life.[177] They dispute Bergson's claim, arguing that 'the life which…in laughter breaks through the barrier, is actually an invading barbaric life, self-assertion prepared to parade its liberation from any scruple when the social occasion arises'.[178] It is not my intention for the comic impulse identified in the visual culture of Control to be accorded the same vital, irruptive energy that Bergson described. This would presume too much agency for the comic. Indeed, the images described here do parody humanity (because they display no human agency), in the same sense that Adorno and Horkheimer disparage the comic and are therefore not automatically emancipatory. But this, I want to argue, is their value. This is what I earlier referred to as a form of 'cynical enlightenment', what Foucault calls the 'living scandal of the truth', where the cynic reveals and lives the 'scandal of truth' rather than withdrawing from it.[179]

This is, moreover, applicable to the pessimistic, indifferent, cynical and depressing aesthetics of Control observed in this thesis, which seem to exceed or fall short of existing narratives of art and visual culture. These images have none of the agency of the avant-garde or the revolutionary praxis of recent socially engaged or activist art. By contrast, they repeat, reiterate, re-present, mirror and reflect - these are the forms of cultural expression that result from our dysphoric worldview, which cannot help but react to the shock tactics of the avant-garde and the art world's

[175] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 138.
[176] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 141.
[177] A crucial element in Henri Bergson's understanding of the 'comic' is the idea of '*something mechanical encrusted on the living*'. This can be observed whenever we perceive anything 'inert' on the 'surface of living society'. Bergson suggests that whilst we generally treat these mechanical and inert aspects of life with seriousness, they 'always include a latent comic element', which, Bergson explains, 'is always waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view'. See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, tr. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 37 – 45.
[178] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 141.
[179] Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the College de France 1983 – 1984*, 180.

persistent appeal to ‘criticality’ with cynical disdain. In doing so, we might identify a recurrence of an implicit negativity that is excluded or functionalised by Control, which seems to make anything and everything productive. This organization of ‘social energy’, whilst locking us, as Shershow writes of the comic spirit, into ‘familiar cages’, also holds out the promise of a threshold, or implicit reversibility to the systems of Control that surround us; reminding us that technological systems, no matter how advanced, have an inbuilt tendency to undermine themselves, oftentimes comically, according to their own functioning. This is ultimately what we observed in the prodigious meaninglessness of Red Bull’s *Stratos* jump (and arguably even more so in Google Vice President Alan Eustace’s attempt), in the stupidity of the internet meme and the automated hate of 4chan, in the horrible void at the heart of the Jpeg, and in the comedic depolarization of screen space.

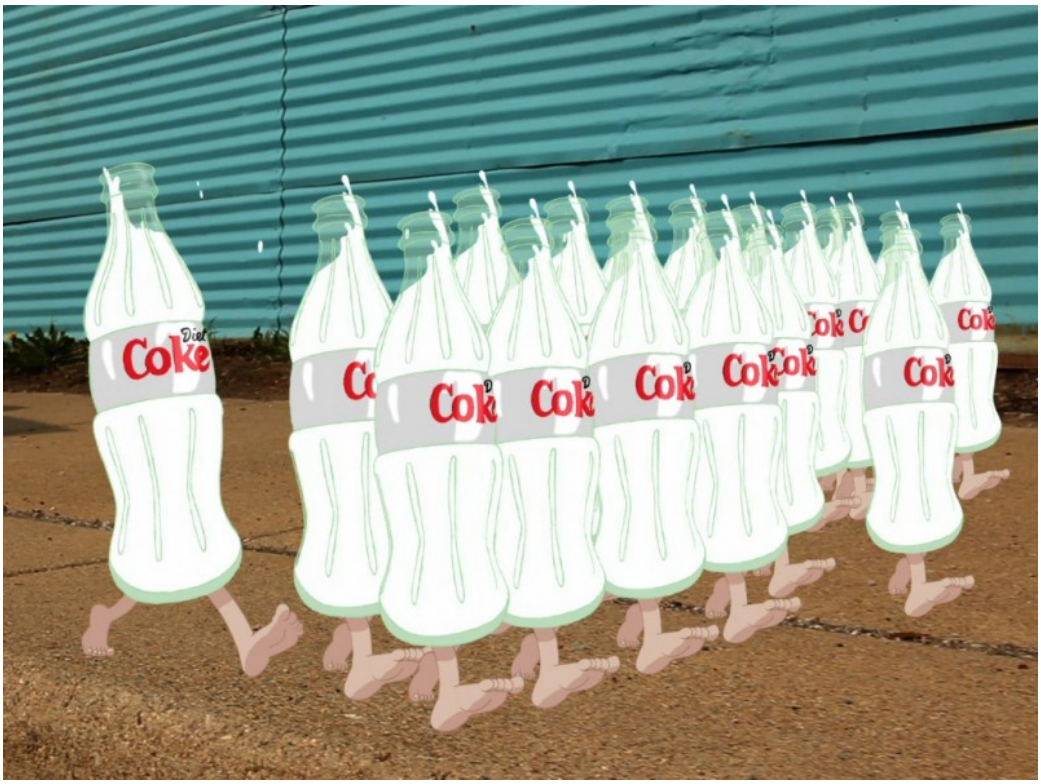


**Fig. 4.1** Still from Jordan Wolfson, *Con Leche*, 2009. Digital video, computer-generated imagery, hand-drawn animation, sound, 22:29. Image Credit: Sadie Coles.


**Fig. 4.2** Still from Jordan Wolfson, *Animation, Masks*, 2011. Digital video, computer-generated imagery, hand-drawn animation, sound, 12:29. Image Credit: Sadie Coles.

**Fig. 4.3** Jordan Wolfson, *(Female Figure),* 2014. Animatronic robot. Private Collection.


**Fig. 4.4** net.art, *CNN Interactive*, 1996 (screen grab). Image taken from http://www.ljudmila.org/naps/cnn/cnn.htm, accessed 20/05/14.

**Fig. 4.5** Still from Jordan Wolfson, *Raspberry Poser*, 2012. Digital video, computer-generated imagery, hand-drawn animation, sound, 13:56. Image Credit: Sadie Coles.

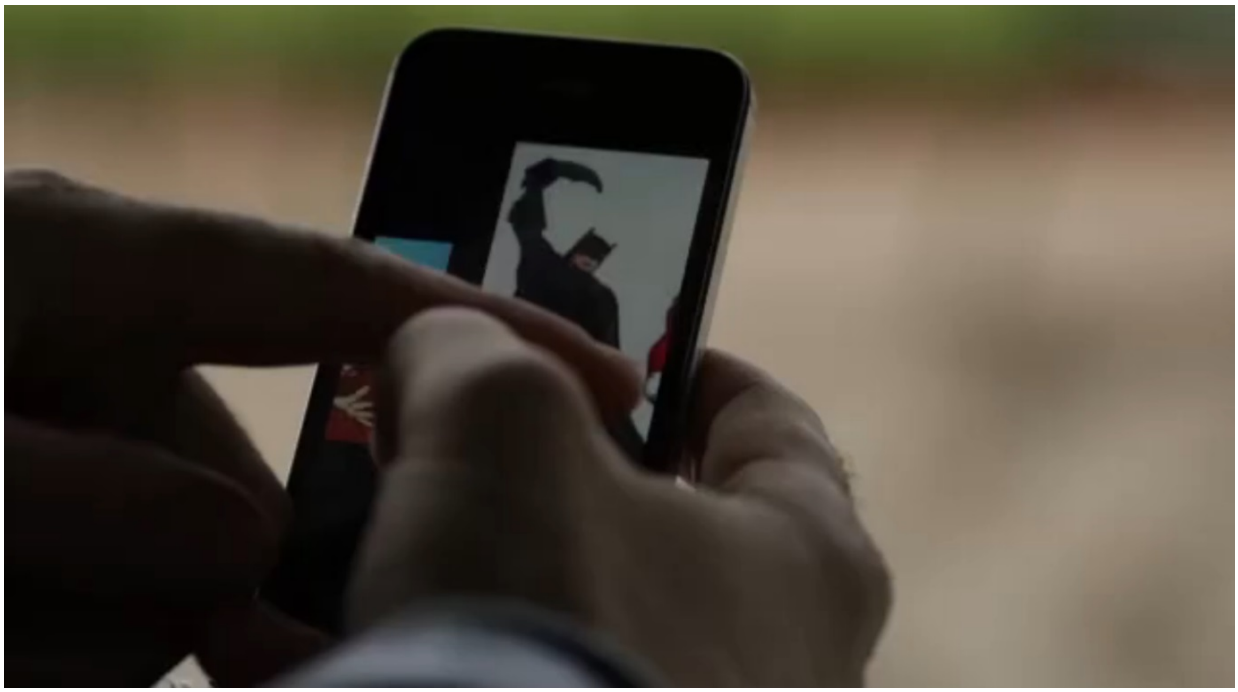

**Fig. 4.6** Still from Jordan Wolfson, *Raspberry Poser*, 2012. Digital video, computer-generated imagery, hand-drawn animation, sound, 13:56. Image Credit: Sadie Coles.

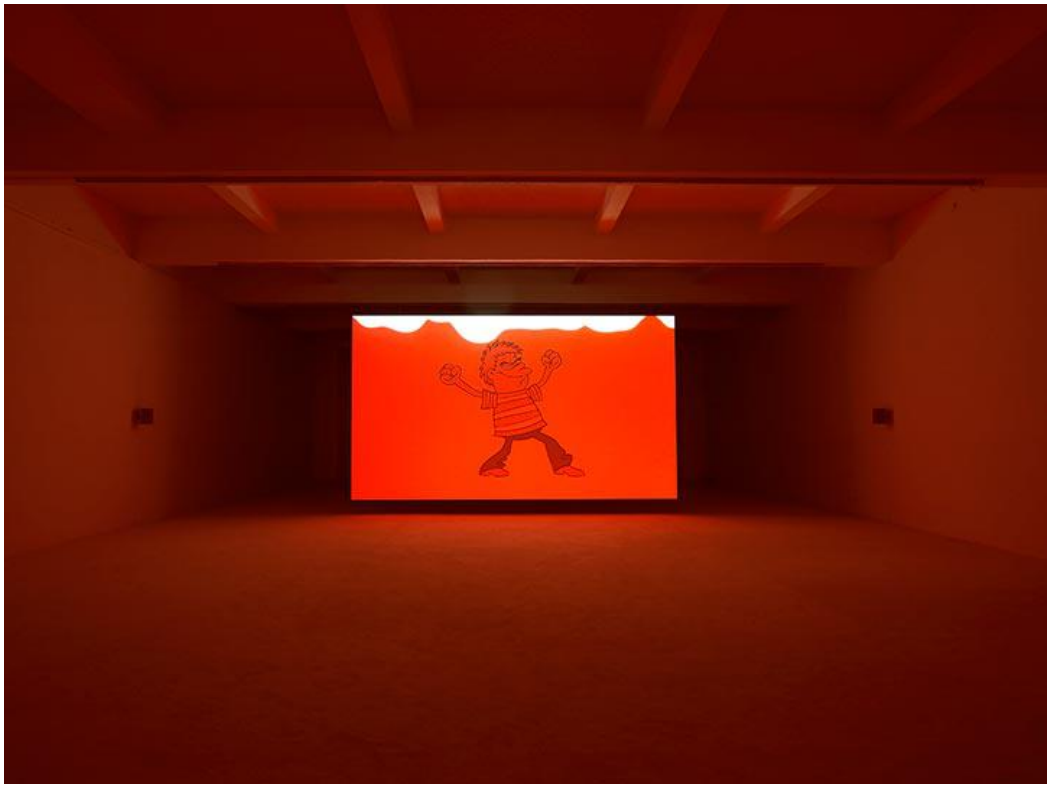

**Fig. 4.7** Still from Jordan Wolfson, *Raspberry Poser*, 2012. Publicity still, installation view Chisenhale Gallery, London.

**Fig. 4.8** Still from 'Samsung Curved TV Commercial 60 Seconds', 2015. Samsung TV commercial, 01:00. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbZYNqL6grQ, accessed 20/06/16.

**Fig. 4.9** Still from Jordan Wolfson, *Raspberry Poser*, 2012. Digital video, computer-generated imagery, hand-drawn animation, sound, 13:56. Image Credit: Sadie Coles

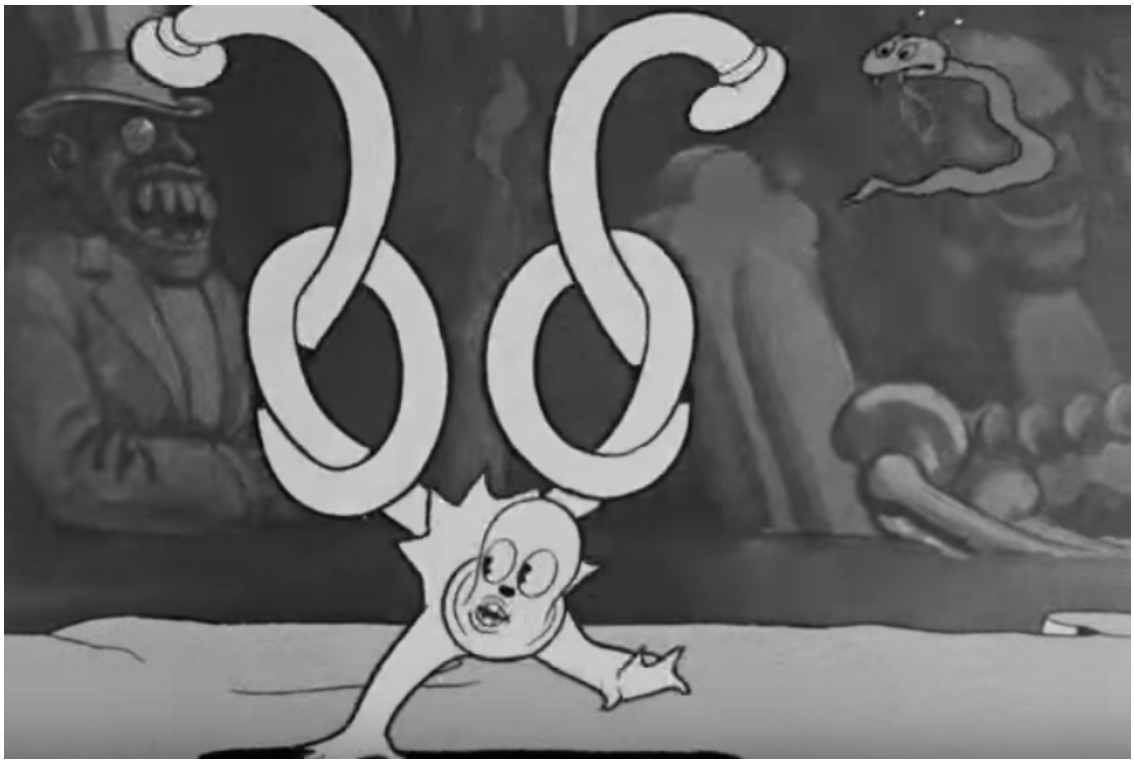

**Fig. 4.10** Still from The Fleischer Studios, *Betty Boop's Snow White*, 1933. Animated film, 07:04. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1u0YYQgwF0, accessed 20/05/15.

**Fig. 4.11** Stills from Jordan Wolfson, *Raspberry Poser*, 2012. Digital video, computer-generated imagery, hand-drawn animation, sound, 13:56. Image Credit: Sadie Coles.

**Fig. 4.12** Stills from The Fleischer Studios, *Betty Boop's Snow White*, 1933. Animated film, 07:04. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1u0YYQgwF0, accessed 20/05/15.

# Epilogue

## Everything is Terrible

*I have had visions and dreams of the future and I have watched and heard children crying and people, old people dying and starving to death…there will come a time when there will be no food to eat and there will be earthquakes in different places…*[1]

Since 2003, the eschatological televangelist Jim Bakker (who was jailed for fraud in 1989 and served five years of a forty-five year sentence) has preached the end of times on the daily broadcast *Jim Bakker Show*. Each program is concluded with a request for a 'Love Offering' of $125. In return for your donation, Pastor Bakker and wife Lori promise to send you a quantity of freeze-dried food for an end time still to be announced. 'Money's gonna be worthless when disaster strikes', Bakker explains; 'that's why I am telling you to stock up on food and survival supplies so you can feed your loved ones when that time comes'.[2] Bakker uses his message of impending disaster, chaos and total environmental collapse to encourage people to exchange their soon to be worthless money for large buckets of survival food products that can fill a storehouse and sustain a family for decades whilst the world breaks down around them. These industrial size buckets are often displayed on set, looming behind the pastor as he preaches. Pop-up adverts also appear across the bottom of the screen, supplementing Bakker's doom-laden message with offers for food – for instance, the $3500 'Time of Trouble Tasty Food PLUS Meal', a seven year supply of food with a twenty year shelf life. Or a $2500 'New Bulk Sampler Bundle', which contains 28 buckets and 23,375 servings (fig. 5.1).

The apocalyptical message of Bakker's show taps into the raw nerve of the Anthropocene, discussed in Chapter One, and the cultural expectation of disaster that comes with an increased awareness of the irreversible and potentially cataclysmic ecological damage done to the environment. This was arguably anticipated by Heidegger in his diagnosis of the 'Age of the World Picture', and the earth's

[1] Jim Bakker transcribed from 'An Earth Shaking Alarm Has Just Sounded We Are Almost Out of Time!', *YouTube* (July 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcnUTG9ukEQ, accessed 10/05/16.

[2] Bakker, 'An Earth Shaking Alarm Has Just Sounded We Are Almost Out of Time!', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcnUTG9ukEQ, accessed 10/05/16.

instrumentalization as 'standing-reserve' by man. Bakker seems to exploit our mass cultural pessimism, or planetary dysphoria, as a means to sell hyper-industrial quantities of food by the bucket-load. To be sure these expectations of the apocalypse are not unprecedented; indeed Bakker bases his preaching on the book of Revelation, not on geological studies of the human impact on the environment (he brands himself 'as one of today's experts on the book of Revelation'). However, the contemporary appetite for the apocalypse to which Bakker appeals is predominately informed by modern science, the predictions of which seem indisputable, empirically proved and seemingly non-negotiable. Bakker's hysteric sales pitch is overzealous and wildly speculative, however at the same time it is coterminous with, and sympathetic to the current popular cultural consciousness, which presumes a pending global catastrophe.

The *Jim Bakker Show* is the basis for a number of videos available online by the satirical video editor Vic Berger IV, who publishes work with the *Super Deluxe* online video network and on his personal account on the video sharing platform Vine (for which he has received the moniker of 'Vine's Strangest Political Satirist' for his six second looping videos of Republican party nominees, in particular Donald Trump and Jeb Bush).[3] He also works as an editor with American comedy duo *Tim & Eric*. Berger's videos of Bakker simply re-present parts of the *Jim Bakker Show* using a variety of editing techniques: loops and repetitions, muting, slowing down, adding pauses, adding sound-effects and soundtrack, panning across the image, zooming in and magnifying certain facial expressions or aspects of the set. One video, titled 'Jim Bakker's Buckets' focuses on the theme of apocalypse and the food that Bakker suggests will see you through it. The Christian Minister Mark Blitz guests on the show featured in Berger's video, and as he prophesises about the 'blood moon' and the anniversary of the 'creation of the world', Bakker works himself into a frenzy. Berger emphasises this with repetitions and zooms of Bakker's and Blitz's facial expressions and gestures and overlays an enigmatic instrumental electronica track by Paul Kass, magnifying the emotional intensity of the show. Of course, Bakker's frenzy lends a sense of urgency to the sales pitch for buckets of food: 'People are

[3] See Sean T. Collins, 'Vic Berger IV is Vine's Strangest Political Satirist', *Vice* (January 2016), http://www.vice.com/read/vic-berger-iv-is-vines-strangest-political-satirist, accessed 05/07/16.

ordering food faster and faster, in a few hours there's gonna' be an event take place, and you won't get food for six months to a year'.[4] Bakker is seen showing off 'eight years of pulp food' in buckets, some of which is cooked on stage with a garden spade: 'two gallons of white rice' and 'twenty two gallons of cheesy broccoli sauce'.[5] Bakker demonstrates the food by using his hand to shovel hot white rice into his mouth whilst crying 'what if you have to survive for two years or three years, you're gonna' need some more food!'[6] The audience applauds Bakker as he eats (fig. 5.2).

Clearly Berger doesn't need to do much to this material to make it seem weird, tragic, terrible and funny. It is already all of the above. Bakker's definitely serious show already seems to contain its own satire and its own comedy. All Berger does is repeat, reiterate and home in on particular details in order to make this apparent: making the terrible seem funny and the funny seem terrible. Berger also edits videos of Jeb Bush's and Donald Trump's appearances in the Republican Party presidential debates and forums, to similar effect. Certainly Bush's and Trump's performances, like Bakker's show, also contain their own satire and comedy – appearing terrible and funny at the same time (fig. 5.3). This is not something to which an artist can add, but can only draw attention to. Indeed, as Berger explains in an interview: 'I like to amplify what's already there and focus on that'.[7]

What value can we ascribe to this process of repetition, mirroring or reiteration, seen previously in the discussion of Wolfson, arguably the only sort of humour possible today when cultural objects contain their own comedy, so that, to restate Andy Kaufman, 'real life is funnier than deliberate comedy'.[8] Berger's action is more or less equivalent to the processes described in the artwork of Ruff and Wolfson, and the idea of cultural objects and technological systems containing their

[4] Jim Bakker transcribed from 'Vic Berger Presents Jim Bakker's Buckets', *YouTube* (November 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOH37W0jA, accessed 10/05/16.
[5] Bakker, Vic Berger Presents Jim Bakker's Buckets', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOH37W0jA, accessed 10/05/16.
[6] Bakker, Vic Berger Presents Jim Bakker's Buckets', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOH37W0jA, accessed 10/05/16.
[7] Vic Berger IV quoted in Chris Moody, 'How one man pranked the presidential race', *CNN Politics* (November 2015), http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/12/politics/2016-election-vic-berger-jeb-bush-neck-tattoo/index.html?eref=rss_topstories, accessed 11/05/16.
[8] Andy Kaufman [1981] quoted in Bill Zehmne, *Lost in the Funhouse: The Life & Mind of Andy Kaufman* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 297.

own comedy or stupidity emerged in my analysis of internet memes and 4chan in Chapter Two, both of which can be seen to simply follow the cultural logic or protocol of the internet. Thus, this question reverberates throughout the thesis. I have attempted to provide some answers, which clarify and appraise the visual culture that is, to my mind, representative of Control societies and a set of seemingly passive artistic strategies that also respond to its conditions. These strategies seem to point toward an underlying Baudrillardian logic of comical reversibility, meaning that our technologies have a tendency to undermine themselves according to their own functioning. For instance, this is the value I have accorded to the 'stupidity' and 'horror' that inheres in the various apparatuses of Control. However, what value is this? What sort of pleasure can we take in this? Is it simply a recreational 'holiday humour'; a stimulating shot in the arm or quick fix for the tired and alienated so that they can return rejuvenated to the normal way of the world?

In a late essay, 'Is Art Lighthearted?' (1967), Adorno grapples with a similar question. His notion of 'lightheartedness' can be seen as synonymous with what we have called the comedic or humorous (in the essay Adorno flits between the terms 'lighthearted' and 'humorous'): 'What is lighthearted in art is…the opposite of what one might easily assume it to be', Adorno writes, 'not its content but its demeanor…its playfulness and not…its stating of intellectual contents'.[9] He continues: '*A priori*, prior to its works, art is a critique of the brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings…That is what is lighthearted in it; as a change in the existing mode of consciousness that is also, to be sure, its seriousness'.[10] Adorno wants to question the efficacy of art's authentic or 'serious' claim to lightheartedness because of the power of the culture industry, which takes art and places it 'among the consumer goods'.[11] This is to say that 'its lightheartedness has become synthetic, false, and bewitched'.[12] And so, in this historical context, when 'art tries of its own accord to be lighthearted', it can only affirm the dictates of the culture industry: it loses its critical capacity to mock the seriousness of reality because its 'ordained cheerfulness fits into the way of the world. It encourages people to submit to what is

[9] Theodor Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?' [1967], *Theodor W. Adorno, Notes to Literature – Volume Two*, tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University, 1992), 248.
[10] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 248.
[11] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 251.
[12] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 251.

decreed, to comply'.[13] Therefore, Adorno argues, '[w]hat was once humor becomes irretrievably dull…degenerat[ing] into the hearty contentment of complicity. In the end it becomes intolerable'.[14]

Whilst it might seem strange to keep returning to Adorno in order to interpret contemporary cultural phenomena, his writing is to my mind still useful. In the present context, and to help me conclude, what seems especially useful and pertinent is his observation of the 'withering away of the alternative between lightheartedness and seriousness' (or the terrible and the comic) in a contemporary art that is taken in hand by the culture industry.[15] This leads to a situation whereby the terrible and tragic can appear comic, and the comic appears dejected. As we have seen, this dialectic runs through the visual culture identified here as distinctive to the societies of Control, in which formerly opposed genres and concepts become blurred or depolarized without resolving into synthesis. In this respect, Adorno's thoughts on art are vital. Moreover, the cultural forms and artworks from the early twentieth-century that Adorno highlights as interesting or 'radical' can be seen to further illuminate and help us understand the enigmatic and impassive forms of today. He suggests that an authentic lightheartedness or humour survives in certain works (he cites, in particular Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka) despite the machinations of the culture industry, in which it has become synonymous with leisure time. It survives as a form of self-critique. This is a 'humor about humor. The artful meaninglessness and silliness characteristic of radical contemporary works of art, characteristics that are so irritating to those with a positive outlook; represent not so much the regression of art to an infantile stage as its humorous judgement on humour'.[16] And thus, humour 'is salvaged in Beckett's plays because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair'.[17] This, to be sure, is not the 'holiday humour' enjoyed as a form of recreation. This is a 'third possibility' – neither lighthearted nor serious.

*Jim Bakker's Buckets* is not funny. There would be no point in it being funny because the *Jim Bakker Show* is already funny, as well as being terrible. This attests

[13] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 250.
[14] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 250.
[15] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 253.
[16] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 252.
[17] Adorno, 'Is Art Lighthearted?', 253.

to the continuing truth of Adorno's statement on the blurring of the comic and the tragic or terrible. Indeed, all the visual culture highlighted in this thesis displays a blurring of certain generic conventions and oppositional concepts. This is partly the reason why they unsettle existing artistic discourses. In this respect, if Berger's video was funny - for instance, if his artistic strategy were to produce a satirical parody of Bakker - it would only affirm the culture of Anthropocenic disaster because this culture, as we have already seen, produces its own comedy. Because of this, typical forms of humour cannot provoke a change in the existing mode of consciousness. It cannot unsettle the functionalization, or 'seriousness', imposed upon life by the societies of Control. Instead the value of Berger's video is based upon it registering an authentic state of consciousness, within which the concepts of the comic and the tragic, the pessimistic or the terrible, collapse under the sign of the Anthropocene, or what I have elsewhere referred to as our bad 'world picture'. The comedic response it nevertheless creates is, by contrast, premised on its lack of comedy: on its drawing attention to the absurdity of comedy when everything is already funny and everything is already terrible. In registering this in a way that is 'neither lighthearted nor serious', as to a certain extent Wolfson does in *Raspberry Poser* and Ruff does in the *Jpegs*, it promotes a consciousness of the present situation that calls into question our current critical vocabulary and, by extension, critical imagination. These works are not expressly critical, transgressive or subversive. Instead, they are based on some paired aesthetic traits of the societies of Control (for instance, stupid and sublime, comic and terrible, suicidal and scientific), which on closer inspection do not always resolve productively, but are often antagonistically tied together as in a 'double spiral'. This is therefore an account of contemporary art and visual culture premised not on the agency of artists, but on the agency of the social and technological systems of Control, which display an implicit tendency to confound, exceed, undermine and disappoint according to their own functioning. My aim here has been to propose a new way of interpreting the seeming meaninglessness, stupidity, passivity and indifference of the art and visual culture that surrounds us: characteristics, which like Adorno says of Kafka and Beckett, might be 'irritating to those with a positive outlook', and are therefore, for the most part, ignored in dominant contemporary art discourse.


**Fig. 5.1** Still from 'An Earth Shaking Alarm Has Just Sounded We Are Almost Out of Time!', *Jim Bakker Show*, June 2015. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcnUTG9ukEQ, accessed 28/06/16.


**Fig. 5.2** Still from Vic Berger IV, *Jim Bakker's Buckets*, 2015. Edited YouTube video, 05:45. Screenshot taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOH37W0jPpA, accessed 28/06/15.

**Fig. 5.3** Stills from Vic Berger IV, 'Mr. Trump and Mrs. Trump explain why Mr. Trump should be President #DonaldTrump', 2016. Vine video, 00:06. Screenshots taken from https://vine.co/u/949288825883095040, accessed 01/07/16.

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